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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA  
  
THE USE OF MYTH AND HISTORY  
IN THE NOVELS OF NEIL M. GUNN

by

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A THESIS  
  
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## ABSTRACT

Every artist faces the problem of organizing his material in order to communicate coherently to the public. Neil Gunn chooses to do this ordering by applying to experience a mythological-historical pattern drawn from Celtic myth, Scottish history and from the fund of archetypal images common to all men. His use of certain patterns, such as the quest, and of figures like Finn and Cuchulainn develops over the years, affected by Gunn's response to world events, such as World War II. In the early novels written before 1939, there is a relatively simple, straightforward application of myth and history to experience, which is limited in scope. The exterior world beyond Celtic horizons intrudes into the Gunnian world picture during World War II. To encompass and order this widened experience, Gunn develops his own personal myths of the poisoned civilization and of the quest for the moment of delight. He also attempts to interweave mythic strands from various mythologies, such as the Celtic, Greek and Biblical mythic systems. Though, in some of the postwar novels, his mythic scheme is unable to assimilate the chaotic experience, yet there is a regeneration of his solution to life in the last works which approaches the stability of the prewar world vision.



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## CHAPTER I

## HISTORICAL, MYTHOLOGICAL AND LITERARY BACKGROUND

Any artist who wishes to rise above the role of entertainer or maker of trivia must come to grips with the problems which face his particular society, and if he would be great, with the problems, which being those of the human condition, are universal, transcending the limitations of time and space. First, the artist has to order in his own consciousness the ever-increasing flux of modern society and thus overcome it and answer it. Having done this, he then must discover a form, a mode of expression, in which to express to as wide an audience as possible his illumination of the question or his answer to it. The finding of an appropriate form and the subject matter chosen as the vehicles of disclosure pose a tremendous hurdle for the artist, for he is faced with an audience, which as literacy increases, is becoming more and more cosmopolitan, polyglot, and multi-cultured. Where is the common ground of understanding and experience? On the other hand, the diversity of the reading public has a tendency to disappear. Individual traits and experiences blend into a universal culture or awareness. Can one offer such an audience an answer intimately connected with a particular





culture, a provincial solution?

Neil Gunn, one of the most prominent contemporary Scottish novelists in the vanguard of the Scots literary renaissance and perhaps embodying best the ideals of the movement, provides us with his solution to the aforementioned problems in his twenty novels. It is my thesis that in order to speak to the world at large, Gunn deliberately utilizes Celtic myth, history, and universal mythic patterns as the basis of the life, the answer to the flux, within his novels, providing the vital life pattern and volition of the characters, being, as it were, bred in their bones. The particular situation, based on a particular myth, is generalized by two factors: first, his response to world events, such as World War II, which modifies and broadens his use of Celtic mythology; and second, the construction of his novels on a mythic skeleton or frame in the Jungian archetypal manner. The use of archetypal figures and patterns, springing as they do from the collective unconscious, immediately universalizes the experience. This ransacking of the realms of anthropology, psychology, and religion for the sake of literature has become increasingly common since the researches of men like Freud, Jung, and Frazer. However, in the case of Gunn and many of his Scottish contemporaries, the rediscovery of one's native mythical and historical background is not an artificial technique nor one forced on the material, for these writers have a particular



theory of history.

Dr Wittig, in his most illuminating book, The Scottish Tradition in Literature, claims that the questions of modern literature: What is the source of life? What is the law, the ritual, the driving force by which man is governed in tracing the pattern of his life? are answered in the following fashion by Gunn and others in their attempt to define man and his destiny. According to Gunn, man is the composite of his ancestors and of history--that is, folk history that stretches back into the primeval experience of man, not the remote meaningless history of kings and queens as taught in schools. The past racial experiences and culture create the individual man, and affect his actions and thought, whether man is aware of his bondage to the past or not. Thus man is not born and raised in an immaculate atmosphere in which he makes his soul and fate as he wills. Rather the past casts its shadow over the present and into the future. In attempting to explain the present condition of man and his future, Gunn is not interested in the chance individual freakish events, but rather in the burden of the past-present-future, in situations in which the readers will meet the pattern of life, its ritual basis. Once they have grasped and accepted this pattern, it will give them the key to the future, for Gunn will have shown them destiny. This feeling for history as the moulder of man is simultaneously both practical and mystical. Sociologists and



historians acknowledge the effect of environment on man, who in turn changes and influences his surroundings through his intimate basic communion with them. The truly whole man carries consciously his racial past, history, and myth with him, but this ancestral burden is best seen in children and women, because "the myth of life with its primeval urges is strongest"<sup>1</sup> within them. The historic and primeval past, the mythic experience of the race, is the road we travel along to live, and in order to survive, we have to relate our past route to the road ahead. It is here that Gunn steps in and would be our guide.

Obviously it is important to know the material with which Gunn is working. Where do his characters live? What are they and what have they been? What thought patterns or mythology of their forebears still affect their actions? To determine Gunn's use of myth and history, we must know the mythology with which he is working, the historical background and the literary background, the latter showing us what has been done in Scottish prose before the modern period in order that we can determine what is new in Gunn's approach.

The Gunn country is usually Sutherland and Caithness in northern Scotland, in Gaelic known as the province of Cait, Cataibh, a barren land of ancient glacier-scarred rock. Looking towards the island of Lewis in the west are a few hamlets on the sea coast which is continually rain-soaked,





storm-swept, where a handful of MacKays, MacLeods, and MacKenzies once lived on a tightrope of survival twixt sea and rock. In the rain shadow of Drum Albain from Ben Hope to Ben Attow, on the east coast, Sinclairs, Sutherlands, Rosses, Munros, and MacKenzies once wrested subsistence from the arable coastland and the great valleys of Kildonan and Strathnaver. During the post-Napoleonic period, these men were driven out like the sheep which replaced them by their clan chiefs, using guns and fire, and eventually they settled abroad in Canada, America, Australia, and on the coast where they set up fishing industries. The Clearances, a traumatic experience for the Highlanders, loom large in the consciousness of Gunn in his novels. As one modern commentator has stated, the Clearances are still current politics in the Highlands.<sup>2</sup> The Great Betrayal of precious resources, both of men and of land, passed men through fire and with the subsequent depopulation of even the coastal areas and the continued unjust rights of the lairds [for example, over sea fishing] stamped an indelible mark on the race and influenced its life and blood thereafter.

What caused the Clearances? Why did the lairds break a centuries-old contract of honor with their kinsmen? These questions we can answer quite easily with cold economic facts and glib discussions of the final dissolution of the clan system after the rebellion of 1745. But the facts will bring





us to another question on the nature of the men involved which perhaps only a writer like Gunn can answer. First the answer to the first question, the cause of the Clearances.

The end of the eighteenth century saw great changes and improvements in agriculture such as the introduction of turnips and potatoes to replace wasteful fallowing. By about 1750, it was discovered that sheep could remain outside during the winter without the protection of tar and butter coatings, which spoilt their fleece, and also that they could stand up to the rigors of droving. So the black cattle [for many centuries the wealth of the clans], which had posed a perpetual problem of winter fodder, were quickly supplanted by sheep. First there was the small white-faced native breed bearing little wool, and then the black-faced Linton breed with a heavier, coarser fleece, grazing in upland pastures all year long, instead of in summer only, as did the cattle. The black cattle gave way to the multi-purpose sheep, because they were no longer profitable in competition with the improved strains developed in the eastern lowlands, such as the shorthorn and polled cattle [later called Aberdeen Angus]. Border sheep-raisers offered the lairds, living beyond their means, higher rents for their lands than could the clansmen, many of whom still used the open-field system of agriculture. To make way for the sheep runs, the small tenants were forcibly evicted and, in some cases, were



resettled in clearance villages along the coasts. The Clearances beginning at the turn of the nineteenth century continued until about 1870 in Sutherland, Inverness, Argyll, Ross and Cromarty.

Why did these people allow themselves to be herded from their homes, their native country, to be scattered around the globe, separated from kith and kin? What kind of men were these? Does Gunn shed light on this problem which historians are unable to resolve?

The tragic irony of the whole situation is that, about 1870, sheep farmers, through experimentation in the eastern lowlands, found that they did not need great tracts for sheep runs, but could graze sheep intensively. The Clearances had been virtually useless and pernicious for the sheep overgrazed the good land, and bracken, heather, and coarse grasses replaced the fine eaten grass. The improved eastern strains of sheep, colonial mutton and wool spelt the end of Highland sheep raising. The landlords turned the estates into deer forests for English sportsmen.

Fate then joined forces with English law, and those farmers who had not been broken by the first clearances were forced to leave their ancestral homes by the great famine of 1848, caused by the failure of the potato crop. The existence of most Highlanders who held on in the coastal areas was always on a bare subsistence level, for the men continued unproductive,



inefficient methods of agriculture, with the result that the people turned more and more to fishing and kelp industries. However, conditions were improved by the Crofters' Holdings Act of 1886, which grew out of a government inquiry, the Napier Commission of 1883. But the young people would not stay in the Highlands, hanging on to mere existence around the fringes of land which should have been theirs by right. The wide glens were quiet and empty of people, save for the sportsmen in season. The heather and gorse which the sheep could not keep back now crept down the hills, ruining the soil, if rendering picturesque the ruined crofts.

The crofts are not the only skeletons on the landscape, for the north is peppered with brochs--strange fortresses of the Picts [see appendix for illustration and definition of broch]. The Picts along with the Clearances occupy an important part of Gunn's historical vision. Because the clans in the northern Highlands played little part in the uprisings of 1644-45 [Montrose], 1689 [Dundee], 1715 [Mar], and 1745-46 [Stuart], these wars, taking place mostly south or east of the Highland Line, did not enter into the consciousness of the people or of Gunn, as they did into the Lowland memories. Neither do the incredibly ferocious and treacherous medieval struggles for clan and regal supremacy impinge on the northern Highland mentality. That part of the country, however, was intimately involved in the struggle between the Picts and Gaels





/Scots of Dalriada/ and Norsemen. It is typical of Gunn's historical theory that he makes the Picts the bridge between myth and history--Angus MacFergus joins modern man to Finn McCoul and Cuchulainn on the one hand, and, on the other hand, to primeval man, the first nameless hunter who stalked the deer. Though Gunn's characters know the brochs, they know nothing of the Picts as a great military and naval power, as a highly organized monarchy passing through female succession, as naturalistic artists of some standing, as 'painted' /tattooed/ men who terrorized their enemies including the Romans until 843 A.D., and whose legacy includes the medieval succession struggles of MacBeth, Gruoch, Duncan, Malcolm, and Donal Bain. But if they know nothing of this, they still inherit the experience and blood of the Picts, and they react in a very special way to the brochs, as we shall see later.

But Man, in Gunn's view, is more than just the product of history. Gunn's probe extends beyond into pre-history; all his characters are close to the primeval or atavistic, and many relive the development of man from his first emergence as a hominid to homo sapiens. The men in his books always carry the experience and knowledge of the Stone Age hunters. As Gunn points out in The Silver Bough, primitive men, alien tribes, ancient racial memories can be transformed from history into folklore or mythology. Thus the dividing line between history and myth is indistinct. Thus history





moves us almost imperceptibly from facts concerning the Picts to "facts" concerning Diarmaid and the Fenians.

As the Scots infiltrated from Argyll into Pictdom, they brought with them their mythology from Ireland and completely obliterated the Pictish mythic system. Many legends which had been formerly set in Ireland were transplanted to Albion; for example, Diarmaid was reputed to have killed the wild boar in Perthshire. A further example is found in the tale of Mananan MacLîr. When Patrick brought Christianity to Ireland, the gods, the Tuatha de Danann, were banished from the land if they refused to be baptized. Mananan MacLîr, King of the Sea, after an incident with a hermit over a mended chalice, left Erin for ever and took up his abode in Scotland. Observers in the last century reported meeting Highland shepherds and fishermen who had frequently seen Mananan, a most benevolent patron of shepherds and all travellers. For some strange reason the other children of Danu were lost in time from Scottish folklore, whereas their defeated enemies, the Fomors [*Famhairean*], or the children of Domnu, lived on as giants. Most of these giants lived in hills and caves, but some took up residence on sea stacks and islands. Bereft of their traditional opponents, the Tuatha de Danann, the giants fought among themselves with boulders, referred to as quoits, or sometimes with battle axes or stone hammers. Many have been named after the devil or after heroes, such as Samson,



Wallace, St Patrick, Alexander Stewart [the Wolf of Badenoch], and even King Arthur, although the use of names of Arthurian characters is relatively late in appearance, as the Arthurian legends were not current in Scotland until the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. All the giants do not live as ordinary men, for there are sleeping giants under various hills, who are like the famed Muchukunda of Hindu mythology. In the north of Scotland, Gunn's country, the giants are commonly identified with Thomas the Rhymer, or with the Gaelic hero, Finn, imported again from Ireland. In novels, such as The Silver Darlings, Gunn extensively uses the figure of Finn, the marvellous warrior, who had eaten, when young, the fabled salmon of wisdom and led the Fenians because of his wisdom and uprightness. Another of the Gaelic heroes, Cuchulainn, is used allusively only, for Gunn ignores the life of the boy-warrior who was defeated by Ailill and Medb in the war known as *Táin Bó Chuailgne* [The Driving of the Cattle of Cooley]. However one episode, that of Cuchulainn, Emer and Fand, he does draw on when he adopts Fand as his chief female character in The Well at the World's End. Gunn is, however, very selective in his use of Gaelic myth, for he ignores the great stories of the Celtic race, such as the Fate of the Sons of Tuirenn, Brian, Tuchar, and Tucharba, who died in fulfilling the blood fine of Cian imposed by Lugh, the Fate of Deirdre [who is closely connected with Scotland] and the sons of



Usnach, the Fate of the Children of Lîr, or the Romeo-Juliet story of Baile and Ailinn. Nor does he utilize folk stories which are specifically Scottish, such as that of Finlay, the Changeling, the Scottish Beowulf. The Cailleach Bheur, the Gaelic version of the White Goddess, appears in the above tale of Finlay, and Gunn uses the figure of the White Goddess though he never makes her specifically Gaelic. We can note from MacKenzie's description of the Cailleach Bheur certain characteristics which Gunn utilizes in his description of women who symbolize some facet of the goddess.<sup>3</sup> She habitually takes on a boulder or standing-stone form and Gunn's women, in particular Kenn's mother in Highland River, are often seen as mountains or rocks. The Cailleach's well of life, from the water of which she renewed her youth and virginity, is echoed in Gunn's well at the beginning of The Well at the World's End and the well in The Drinking Well. Lastly, the Cailleach is a mother of many children and Gunn's women are often considered not merely as the mother of their own personal family but also the mother of an entire race.

When mythology becomes an integral part of the life of the people, it becomes transmitted into folklore. However, the figures of popular superstition such as the glaistig /another form of the White Goddess/, urisk /a half-man, half-beast/, baobhan sith /vampire/, or the fairies, actually fallen angels, play little part in the Gunn novels. However, it is





worthwhile speaking of the Gaelic theory of souls which Gunn does use in several works. It was commonly believed that one's soul or ghost was separate from one's body, but it accompanied one everywhere till just before death, though it might have anticipated one at a door or on a staircase. A common image of the spirit is a butterfly, which in Gaelic is always associated with God /Scottish Gaelic butterfly-god names include dealbhan-dé--image or form of God; dearbadan-dé--manifestation of God; teine-dé--fire of God; dealan-dé--brightness of God; eunan-dé--small bird of God; tarmachan-dé--God's ptarmigan, and most commonly in Gunn--amadan-dé--God's fool/. The more general mythic elements which Gunn uses are those which are common to all human thought; that is, the images and patterns called archetypal by Jung. These, including the quest pattern, the great mother, and the hunter, will be discussed in the treatment of the individual books.

Thus far we have looked briefly at certain periods of history and facets of Celtic mythology, a knowledge of which is necessary in order that we may gauge how Gunn is metamorphosing his material and developing it for his own ends. However, it is also necessary to examine the literary tradition in which he stands in order to determine just how or if he diverges from the accepted practice, to find out what is different about his approach.

Prose, especially of a fictional nature, has not been





well-developed in Scottish literature especially when compared with the vital poetical tradition. In the late fifteenth century there were a few Scots prose translations, but Latin was much preferred to the vernacular for all serious intellectual purposes except the theological controversy of the Reformation, which was written in English primarily for political reasons. During the late sixteenth century, there were a few translations of histories; for example, Bellenden's translation of Boece's Chronicles of Scotland. Lindesay of Pittscottie's Historie and Chronicle of Scotland [1575] translated the character of the contemporary poetry of Barbour, Dunbar and Henryson into a vital prose characterized by a dramatic sense of character, direct realism and accurate observation of sensuous and graphic detail. This style we find echoed in Melville's autobiography and diary and Knox's History of the Reformation in Scotland. A little later, Urquhart produced his masterly translation of Rabelais which one critic has seen as having no parallel in English prose until Joyce.<sup>4</sup>

Basically the problem of these writers was to find a language and style in which to express themselves. This problem was engendered by other considerations, for example, the composition of the audience, a particularly important question to the eighteenth-century writers from Hume to Burns. The subject of poetry also created problems of style and language: Is Scots a language fit as a vehicle for elevated matter or



style? Does one lose the distinctively individual Scottish feeling of the subject matter and emotion, when one uses English in which to express it? Such poetic problems were further complicated by a strong tradition of Gaelic poetry, but this did not enter into the problem of prose-writing. Scotland had no Chaucer to establish for his own and successive generations of writers a single language or dialect for literary efforts. One could generalize with safety in claiming that the literature was split into two main camps according to language and corresponding style. The best poetry was in Scots, the vernacular, partaking of the life and spirit of the people, whereas the best prose was increasingly in English as the seventeenth century moved into the eighteenth. English, with its attendant rational classical nature, intellectual strength and learned vocabulary, was deliberately adopted by the literati, and as is usually the case with an adopted tongue, its use was intellectually perfected, but it did not for some time become a part of the emotional, creative side of national life. As Wittig states:

And, finally, whereas poetry is part of a living tradition, made up of symbols, allusions, values felt and recognized by the community out of which it grows, the Anglo-Scottish neo-classicism of the North Britons was primarily a deliberate attitude; and it is small wonder that Ramsay, Fergusson, and Burns wrote good poems in Scots, but invariably bad ones in English.<sup>5</sup>

What was obviously needed was someone who could either make Scots a language comprehensible to non-Scots and give it



stature and respectability or else who could rework English till it was plastic and vivid enough to express the Scottish experience. The first major figure in Scottish creative prose, Sir Walter Scott, was not interested in this problem. The historical novels which are popular outside his own country, such as The Talisman, Kenilworth, and Ivanhoe, are written in elegant English for an English audience, taking full advantage of the growing romanticism of the times in the unreal pageant-like view of history. However, in such works as The Antiquary, Old Mortality, and Heart of Midlothian, Scott has a deep interest in history which transcends the antiquarian's curiosity and becomes a genuine interest in the common people and in the struggle between different cultural traditions, such as Highland Jacobitism and Lowland Covenantry, between an individual and the established tradition which was usually portrayed as narrowness of thought and life under an extreme church. Scottish life, as reflected in the last mentioned novels, is full of potential and fulfilled tragedies, arising from the violent head-on collision of opposing ideals and emotions.

It has often been remarked how stiff and lifeless Scott's main characters are in comparison to his minor figures, his common people. This is a result of both his use of language and his particular interest in history. He is interested in history as a formative force on the people--a man is what he





is through the forces of events in society working upon him. In this emphasis on the importance of common people /he has no great individual characters or heroes/, Scott stands firmly in the egalitarian tradition of Scottish literature. In the matter of language, Scott is not a vital writer when using genteel English or attempting to reproduce Gaelic, but in the speeches of the common people, like Edie Ochiltree or Meg Merrilees, he is using a living Scots tongue, which does not descend into a vulgar regional dialect, but which is the pulse of the race throbbing out the essence of its life.

Many Scottish writers of the nineteenth century, finding a ready audience in England, forsook their native land and any conscious manifestations of its culture or language. Those who remained at home were overshadowed by Burns and Scott, and were content, in large measure, to copy the masters. The only novelist to have survived from this period is Galt, who wrote what were possibly the first novels in Scottish literature which fall into the category of social realism--Annals of the Parish, The Provost, and The Entail. He, too, was aware of the problem of communication, and used Scots for dialogue, and mostly English for narrative passages. However, the best writers and minds went to England. As Wittig states:

The tradition seemed really to have come to an end, and not with a bang, but a whimper, as seen in, say 1880, there seemed no future for a distinct Scottish utterance in poetry and prose. Those who had something to say catered (whatever the





disadvantages) for the British public: those who did not catered for provincial quaintness and tartan-hungry holidaymakers; and in their case the sweeter (and sicklier), the better.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover,

Distinctively Scottish literature as such had foundered in a bog, or seemed at best to have been relegated to the kailyard, the bothie, and the Burns Night Supper.<sup>7</sup>

The novel begins its upward swing again in the works of Stevenson, who, like Scott and Galt before him, is aware of history and the language problem, which he does not successfully solve. For his view of history as a moulding effect, we can turn to the Weir of Hermiston, where he describes:

... the mark of the Scot of all classes: that he stands in an attitude towards the past unthinkable to Englishmen, and remembers and cherishes the memory of his forebears, good or bad; and there burns alive in him a sense of identity with the dead even to the twentieth generation.<sup>8</sup>

Stevenson goes even further than this, saying:

The power of ancestry on the character is not limited to the inheritance of cells. If I buy ancestors by the gross from the benevolence of Lyon King of Arms, my grandson (if he is Scottish) will feel a quickening emulation of their deeds.<sup>9</sup>

After Stevenson, one can detect two lines of development forming. One is typified by George Douglas Brown in The House with the Green Shutters in which we have the inheritance of Galt--realism, bitter and sharp like a physical blow. The other line is that of Gaelic influence, best seen in Sharp and Neil Munro, and partially observed in MacDougall Hay,



who bridges the two developments in his only novel, Gillespie. In Sharp and Munro we have an attempt to present a picture of the Gael, to account for him by means of his history and cultural tradition embodied in his mythology, poetry and music. Sharp fails, as did the early Irish Revivalists, to introduce effectively what one might call a Gaelic tone or quality to his work, while Munro creates a blend of English, Scots and Gaelic in vocabulary and mode of expression.

The tempo of this rejuvenation or renaissance of Scottish literature, exemplified in the novel form by Stevenson, Brown and Munro and MacDougall Hay, began to speed up considerably. During the second and third decade of this century there was a veritable spate of social realism novels, which unlike their predecessors, those by Brown and Galt, dealt with the city. In their highest form of expression, as in Blake's The Shipbuilders, they rise above the limitations of social realism in order to ask the ubiquitous question of Scottish writers--"What are we and why?" Thus far, the culmination of this movement has been in Lewis Grassie Gibbon's A Scots Quair, which transcends the personal or social level to create a great mythic cycle of life. This trilogy, written in Scots, explores the problem of Scottish and English culture, resolving life in the figure of Chris, the eternal Woman, one with the earth, and with the dark gods and the nameless men.

Historical novels, popular in the Victorian era but now



out of fashion because of their excessive nineteenth-century romanticism, became less bad imitations of a less artistic side of Scott, and more deeply involved in the serious effects of events on the Scot and his culture. The most popular of modern Scottish novelists outside of Scotland is probably Eric Linklater, who bears least resemblance to his contemporaries and the past novelists. However, as he is less obviously part of Scottish novelist tradition, Gunn is almost blatantly a successor to Munro, Stevenson and Scott. The setting of his novels is so prominent in his works that critics have misinterpreted him as merely a regional novelist, a master of 'local colour'. His language is that of the Highlander, English softened by Gaelic expressions, a hybrid, not so offensive as Sharp's is, but more richly expressive and connotative than ordinary English, yet still comprehensible and meaningful to an audience wider than that of his contemporaries. His treatment of history, his transformation of events into mythic pattern we will observe later. As J. M. Reid states, these novelists are deeply interested in Scotland, not merely for a picturesque or comic background, but for something which is important, is of value for themselves and for others in the future.<sup>10</sup>

Having sketched the literary background against which Gunn works, we are now in a position to see how he is an innovator or how he develops the tradition. Having noted some





historical facts and some mythological stories, we are able to judge what Gunn is doing with history and myth. Now we can turn to his novels themselves to examine the use of myth, history and folklore, within the life in the novel as a main-spring of character and action, and as a pattern to control the form of the novel itself, in order that we may see him recreate the consciousness of his race and create a life pattern for all men, for us, regardless of culture or temporal background.

Because Gunn's use of myth and history develops over a period of years greatly affected by the Second World War with its accompanying atrocities, we shall examine a selection of his novels in chronological order divided into three periods, namely, early, middle and late. The first period contains Morning Tide [1931] and Highland River [1937], the second, Young Art and Old Hector [1942] and The Green Isle of the Great Deep [1944], while the third is divided into two parts, The Shadow [1948] and The Lost Chart [1949], and the other, The Silver Bough [1948] and The Well at the World's End [1951].



## CHAPTER II

## THE NOVELS OF STABILITY

The novels of the early period include Morning Tide /1931/, The Lost Glen /1932/, Sun Circle /1933/, Butcher's Broom /1934/, and Highland River /1937/. Of these five, the first and last were chosen as representative of the early work of Gunn, not only because of their popularity, which has been greater and more lasting than that of the other three, but also because they display prototypical examples of Gunn's mythology. Morning Tide, however, is as we shall see a false start, an exploration of an avenue quickly abandoned by the author, whereas Highland River is perhaps the greatest achievement in the early period of the utilization of such patterns as the quest, the mother figure and the hunter.

Morning Tide, Gunn's third book, first brought him prominently to the attention of the public. It is divided into three parts, the first two of which are centred on a storm which threatens the fishing fleet of a village in Caithness, and in particular threatens the life of the father of Hugh MacBeth, the book's chief character, and on a clandestine salmon poaching expedition which is the initiation of the boy,



Hugh. The third part is subdivided into the silent struggle of Hugh's sisters, Kirsty and Grace, for the love of Charlie Chisholm, and their mother's struggle with death.

Morning Tide is probably the most realistic of Gunn's novels, the most deserving of the criticism which could be levelled at it that it is purely regional in nature with no wider significance than a fixing of a particular segment of life in a backwash area of society. However, Gunn is establishing for himself and his readers a standard to hold for a greater or more profound comprehension of his answer to the universal chaos. He is showing the reader a picture, at once mystical and realistic, of the Celtic race. At this stage of his development, the author believes that this picture could serve as an answer to the chaos. A village in Caithness he sees as a microcosm of the macrocosm that is the history and character of the race and of all men. On the realistic level of portrayal, we have the picture of the mussel-collecting and the minute details which form a composite portrait or mosaic of life on a croft at the turn of the century. But a race is not merely defined by the physical environment, and Gunn, when defining the spiritual facet or quality of the people, uses myth.

Though this book, of all Gunn's books, contains perhaps the least amount of mythology as a part of life consciously accepted by the characters, we must examine the mythic





framework which is present. In the mythic figures used by the author, we can see future lines of development of mythic technique. The life presented in the book is cast in the heroic mould, its savour of the sea, of the heroic world of the Vikings. Life is summed up by Hugh thus:

All that had happened throughout the evening flashed through Hugh's mind, not so much in vivid images as in a vivid impressionism. The spirit, the essence, of the happenings. A man's work, the victorious fight, the attitude of his sister, of his mother, the endurance and lonely dignity with which he had borne himself. And the fight!--the fight!  
 [pp. 60-61] <sup>1</sup>

The men, on whom the sustenance of life depends, are heroic idealized silent giants of men like the Viking, or John and Alan MacBeth who live existence as an ennobling struggle with the sea and land. Talking of the problem of bringing in the boats in a storm, Gunn sketches their essential quality thus:

But there is also the life of a boat. There is always the pride of seamanship. Finally, with a smashed boat there is no fishing, nothing coming into the house. It is a complicated problem for the man at the tiller, who for hours has fought with death, slipping him by inches, smashing into him bow first, yawing and lifting, but never for an instant relaxing a tension that grows cold and implacable as the green sea water; that, in desperate moments of crisis, grows colder still. It is not easy to give in to the ancient enemy. [p. 81] <sup>2</sup>

Even loud-mouthed Dugald Sandison can at moments enter this world of men, as can Jimak, the tailor, who has forsaken the sea ways of his grandfather, the Viking. In Jimak, we have the epitome of what Stevenson talked about in The Weir of Hermiston when he speaks of the power of ancestry. Jimak





shows the influence of heredity under the strain of the occasion. Despite "the pinched face, the rounded shoulders, the tailor's legs that were not quite straight,"/p.85/3 he plays a man's part, "Viking blue of the eyes on fire, the blood singing."/p.85/4 Hugh MacBeth is also affected by his blood, for as he watches his father bring in the boat, his soul is a flame which sings, "Oh, Father!" to generations of Norsemen and Gaels.

Such are the men that are portrayed in the book, but they are not the figures which are imprinted on the reader's mind. Rather it is the stable, life-giving women, standing at the centre, who hold the world and the men together, ever fighting the centrifugal tendencies of both the world and the men. The book is dominated by three women, the mother, Kirsty, and Grace. Grace, having served as a lady's maid in England, has been cut off from the hardness and sternness of her native milieu. Therefore, her resulting softness and charm, whilst at times delighting her brothers, is also seen as dangerous and bad. This strange softness and charm is symbolized in her scent of which it is said:

It had a strange unlawful effect upon them, this scent. Books of martyrs and whores of Babylon. Its invitation was a betrayal. It was bodily and fatal. They feared and mistrusted it. There was no use in it, no grey truth, no firmness, no iron. It drifted past their nostrils, wanton and exquisite. /p.145/5



However, it is not this kind of woman who has captured Gunn's imagination, but rather Hugh's mother and Kirsty who represent facets of the great mother figure, who appears in her various forms of nymph, mature goddess and hag in Celtic mythology, as noted by MacKenzie. This concept of womanhood Gunn is only beginning to develop in this novel. However, Kirsty moves from the nature of the goddess to assume the basic characteristic of the men's world, that is, heroism. She is the product of the heroic experience of her race and relives it, recreates it for her people, through story-telling. As Gunn expresses it, there is something in Kirsty that was like story-telling in a saga, a quality that possessed the simple, awful note of the great hero-stories, a quality inherited through her mother. As seen by Hugh, Kirsty, intimately connected to the tragic life of the race, is always moving, like her tales, from the personal into the legendary, "where the last strands of being quiver together,"/p. 68/6 beyond them lying black nothing. Existing as she does in the masculine framework of the heroic, one can recognize Kirsty as symbolic of the passionate, vital side of the heroic nature, the eternal woman on the breakwater willing her men home through the storm, and if they fail, rising through intimacy with sorrow to tell their tale with the sweet "honey of woe,"/p. 68/7 pure metaphysical feeling detached from the immediately personal event. It is the popular picture of the Gaelic woman portrayed in



much literature concerning the less frequented areas of Ireland and Scotland, such as we see in Synge. This side of the women is more and more ignored in Gunn's later books because of its very provinciality and he stresses increasingly the type figure of the mother, who, unlike Kirsty, is more explicitly identified as the source of life for her husband and son-lovers, the guiding principle for their actions and their decisions. In this novel, she is sketched as the centre of life, "for she was the permanent centre round which they all revolved ..." [p.57]<sup>8</sup> responsible for the life of the family, keeping her sons from the sea even to the point of sacrificing herself by sending the eldest to Australia, a journey of no foreseeable return in those times. We see her, as provider for the family, at the last tea before Alan and Grace depart. Though the children are at times aware of their mother in a supra-human sense or an extra-personal manner so that she loses her particular individual identity, they are never more aware of this than at the end of the book when she lies dying. In Part III, Chapter VI, Gunn summarizes the character of the mother and Kirsty as the latter reads from Ecclesiastes. He also summarizes life above the area of the men's heroic fight and beyond the plane on which Kirsty normally lives and which Hugh recognizes as the level of "the inexorable ways of life." [p.245]<sup>9</sup> The mother, full of grace, of charity, is beyond and above all religions;





she becomes in the eyes of her children an unaging "great mother of great peoples" /p. 249/<sup>10</sup>. Like the earth itself, with which she is closely associated, the mother does not die, and Hugh goes to the woods in order to bring her what he calls "an offering" /p. 256/<sup>11</sup> for a goddess, the Earth-mother. Like the other archetypal figures in this novel, that of the mother figure is used only tentatively and with a lack of finesse.

Other mythic or historical elements, which we shall see repeated and developed in other works, include animism, the brochs, the initiation hunt, and the effect of ancestors. Wittig claims that animism is a common feature in much Scottish writing, especially Gaelic. Examples of it are common in Gunn and appear in Morning Tide; for example, the passage on darkness at the end of Part I, Chapter IV in which the darkness forms into a spirit to seize Hugh. This feeling for the infusion of spirit life into inanimate objects is attached to the broch where Hugh takes refuge from Charlie Chisholm. When younger, Hugh had been deserted by his elder brother, Alan, in the fort, and had been nearly overcome with panic "trying to escape from not only what was in the walls, but what was in the earth beneath" /p. 189/<sup>12</sup>. But now he could enter and perform his vigil, a trial to gain metaphorical knighthood. When one could stand alone in the broch listening to and watching the stones then one gains



... a certain secret power. It remained hidden in you, a live strength ... a swift blow. A man's blow. No one knew about it! But when you left the place you could run and laugh to yourself, and give lightning thrusts, even inside your pockets, as if your energy in remaining silent so long had hardened and curled up like steel ... /p 190/13

This secret power is connected or identifiable with the phenomenon of "the black roots of being that come alive in the Broch." /p 193/14 There would appear to be some essential spiritual part of the boy that is activated in the ruins, that is also contained in the psychic atmosphere of the broch, in communion with past men. We have already seen Hugh identified with Norsemen and Gaels and here he is identified particularly with the Picts who built the broch. He is also identified with primeval man, the hunter. He undergoes a tribal initiation into the estate of a hunter performed by Alan, his brother, and Alan's friends in a salmon poaching expedition. In this he is aware of the desire for the first time to be a provider for his family:

A great desire came upon him to provide for the house. To hunt and kill, to bring food home, and fire. His eyes glistened, but in their light there was also something of awe. Life could hold nothing more supreme than that. To be the provider, the giver. The importance of it made him quiver. He saw in a flash deep into man's estate. The glory, the power, and the self-restraint.... /p 192/15

Like many of Gunn's characters in his later novels, the boy catches a salmon and goes through a state of rapture, of fierce hunger for possession, of joy. He passes through a reaction



fully described in Atom of Delight and described thus here:

The laughter spilt in glimmering silence over his face. His head jerked hither and thither from listening pauses .... The laughter came to his throat and he let it out huskily, softly, his shoulders doubling up. His face, wrinkling, took on a cunning look, full of gleeful triumph, that yet intensified its open innocence. At once a boy and something older; as if the wood had entered into him, the shape of the trees, the smell of the earth, the capture, the silence. He could have danced and slashed and danced.

His senses grew abnormally acute. The salmon of knowledge under the nuts of the hazel of wisdom. But deeper than that, deeper than conscious thought or myth. Sheering right through to the vivid and unconditional, where are born the pagan deities, who are lovely until conscious thought degrades them. /p.199/16

The end of the hunt, the moment of identification with the primeval is a moment of unalloyed joy, a moment when the rest of the world is shut outside beyond the magic circle circumscribed around one. But in the modern world, there is always a corrosive force, which, like a weasel sucking eggs, eats away the joy and innocence of the moment, turning it into what Gunn calls a poisoned moment. Such moments are actually not really developed until his later novels and a male figure personifying this corrosive force is later developed by Gunn. Therefore, we shall leave a discussion of the poison till we consider the later novels. However, in Morning Tide we can see the seed of this poisoned moment in the Charlie-Kirsty scene in Part III which develops into the Hugh-Bill fight and the beginning of the poisoned man in Charlie.





In this first novel, then, we have Gunn moving towards already creating archetypal patterns and figures bound inextricably to myth and history. But the technique is not developed here, for we have only the embryonic development of what will become a major element in Gunn's works. Morning Tide remains to a large extent a piece of realistic fiction, on which has been superimposed a heroic pattern of life and man. This pattern or heroic tone is discarded by Gunn after this novel as being too narrow a view of life or analysis of man. In the future he will seek to set up an ideal to be reached after, which will not be dependent on a particular environment or occupation such as assumed by the heroic ideal presented here, like seafaring.

Three novels later, when he comes to write Highland River, he has a surer grip of his message and his means of communication. In the dedication of this work, Gunn states that he had not meant to write such a book, but that some ancestral instinct had set him off on a queerer hunt than he had yet tackled. Though admitting the true-to-life quality of the incidents, he claims that he has not written an individual biography, but rather is in pursuit of a moment of delight in order to find its source. In this hunt, he creates a new mythic expression of the life of man.

At the beginning of the book, he creates a parallel between a salmon and man. The salmon's life is man's life.





He presents the salmon as thinking and reacting like a human, responding individually to events and stimuli. Bearing an uncanny resemblance to human moods, it begins to move in from the sea, drawn by a strange desire and restlessness up the river, on what Gunn regards as a quest for pleasure, to spawn. Gunn continually draws parallels from the salmon's movements to the history of human development and to the development of consciousness within a human mind. An example of this can be found in the boy Kenn's reverie in school after his capture of the salmon:

No wonder Kenn was inclined to fall into a state of abstraction, where story and meaning ran into a silver glimmer, or dropped out of sight altogether, dropped, perhaps, upon some "continental ledge" of the mind, where through aeons back beyond reckoning, it had emerged upon the beaches, the rivers, and finally upon the dry land. /p. 32/<sup>17</sup>

Not all the salmon move out from the darkness of the sea up the rivers. There are those old fat salmon whose desire and potency has faded and who are "in the abyss for ever".

/p. 34/<sup>18</sup> If man does not seek like the virile salmon, he too will sink deeper and deeper into the abyss. The natural movement of life is out of the unconscious depths of unfulfilment and up on to the rivers and beaches. What the salmon seeks is pleasure, a quest for moments of happiness, just as man seeks. Though the scientists and humanists attempt to provide answers to the riddle of the salmon's return to his birthplace, Gunn, through Kenn, asserts that the salmon goes



home because like man "he wants to catch inside himself ... something very elusive, because it is so imponderable, so without meaning and aim. Yet it achieves a startling reality when caught and held--as it must be and always is--suddenly". (p.36)<sup>19</sup>

When the element is caught, there is a moment of sheer unconditional delight, perhaps, as Gunn states, troubling in an old panic sense, ecstatic, or by a lure of memory, evasive as a forgotten scent drawing one towards it as towards a source--like the heather honey smell which makes Kenn and his friends without hesitation follow a stream chosen by ancestors for thousands of years. For a man perhaps the pull is that of the magnetism of distant hills, but whatever draws the salmon or man, the river is the river of life for both. As Gunn says, "The salmon is swimming back to the source of life", (p.37)<sup>20</sup>

"The river became the river of life for Kenn", (p.40)<sup>21</sup> "In zero moments it could rise before him with the clearness of a chart showing the main current of his nervous system and its principal tributaries", (p.40)<sup>22</sup> and lastly:

Going from the mouth to the source may well seem to be reversing the natural order, to be going from the death of the sea, where individuality is lost, back to the source of the stream, where individuality is born. Yet that is the way Kenn learned his river and, when he came to think of it, that is the way he learned life. (p.49)<sup>23</sup>

As Kenn moves upstream, identity comes upon him, for though in the beginning his expedition was consciously motivated



only by the hunting instinct, eventually the hunting forays develop into an exploration into the source of the river and into the source of himself. As a man is the product of his ancestors, the journey is also into the source of Kenn's forebears, back beyond the dawn of history. Like the salmon pushing up-river, Kenn traverses territory, that has been marked by successive people--aboriginal Iberians, Picts, Gaels, Vikings--and that has absorbed the thought and being of the dark, nameless men. Conscious acceptance of these creators of one's personality and understanding of them are necessary in order to climb out of the deep abyss, to arrest the fattening tendencies of the great salmon who have lost all desire and potency. Kenn, the grown man, is aware of the influence of past men and

... he would like to stop the thickening of his mind, to hunt back into that lost land, where Alfred and Nero, for all that they could be understood, were foreigners to his blood. The mind that secretly quickened before a broch, before a little path going up through a birch wood, to presences not looked at over the shoulder, possessed a magic that it seems more than a pity to have lost .... [pp 61-62/24

If the hero could recapture and sustain these qualities, he feels that he could recapture not only

... the old primordial goodness of life but its moments of absolute ecstasy, an ecstasy so different from what is ordinarily associated with the word that its eye, if it had one, would be wild and cold and watchful as the eye of the gull on the cliff top.  
[p. 62/25





What if man does not follow this pursuit for a re-experience of the Golden Age? What is the resulting state of life that Gunn cannot accept, which he fights as poisoned and degrading to humans? The first developed view we have of Gunn's horrifying world vision which drives him to turn to mythology and even older folk existence is presented in this novel.

What a subject for a cinema film--from the time when the hunters of the golden age first 'settled down' and started the creation of gods and demons, priest-craft and sacrifice, kings and slaves, right up to the perfect culmination and co-ordination of these elements in the Great War!

Under the gorgeous palaces and solemn temples of the Nile, what millennia of dark and bloody rites! Rome crucifying her slaves, crucifying Christ. Rome of the Inquisition torturing in the name of Christ. The slave hordes turned into slave armies and wheeled by Napoleons to gut each other on the plains of Europe. The ride of the Industrial Age. Machines as the new torturers and the new war-weapons. The hordes marshalled in millions. High explosive for mangling the bodies. Poison gas for disintegrating the lungs. Barbed wire for exhibiting the spectacle of a slow writhing to death. And the speaking voices always solemn. The priest of Memphis. Pontius Pilate. Through the Dark Ages the voices come. From eternal damnation we deliver you in the name of God. Prison for Galileo. Fire for the Maid. Famine and disease for the hordes. Kings and King-Emperors. Statesmen. Captains of Industry. Children of the hordes in foetid mills; women as beasts of burden staggering along dark colliery tunnels.

Voices of foreign secretaries as solemn today as the voice of Memphis. More money. More high explosive. More gas. In the name of Civilization, we demand this sacrifice...

Nor does all that fine rhetoric (says Kenn to his imaginary disputant) give any real idea of the unspeakable personal abominations, from the filth of sex perversions to the drawn-out mental horrors that yelped--and still yelp-- in madness, in mad-houses.



It's a far cry to the golden age, to the blue smoke of the heath fire and the scent of the primrose! Our river took a wrong turning somewhere! But we haven't forgotten the source. Why blame me for trying to escape to it? /pp.122-123/26

This general view is particularized by a view of a Glasgow slum where a young girl in labour is screaming because she is a beast in a trap, a soul crying, "O God" but unable to rise above the "flesh clamped in the trap." /p.197/27 Life becomes "The Horror! The Horror!" and the terrifying danger is that people will accept the lies of men in control, who would build human life into a social complex of the beehive, built on a world of "skeleton bones, gaunt outlines that curved inward like iron girders of a gutted ruin, with sub-human life in the base of the ruin, scurrying through putrefying smells." /p.196/28 As Kenn thinks of it:

Quick-stinging insect intelligences creating an insect philosophy, an insect social order .... Made one think of the bees that sting the mouse to death and wax him over in a pale aseptic mausoleum. How dreadful, how sterile, a nightmare! /p.245/29

The need to regain one's individuality, to achieve real humanity is overwhelming, seeing the world as Gunn sees it. People have always felt the necessity of this refinding of salvation, of humanity, for as Gunn claims, the source of the river is the "desert place into which the prophets went to find their gods," /p.211/30 and to which the seers repaired in order to overcome their minds and bodies and



to experience visions "bright and clear as the evening skies beyond the moor ridges"/p.211/<sup>31</sup>. Men have throughout all time abandoned the populous places and come to the source to find that which was lost.

The crucial problem then becomes whether now men can recapture the moment of joy, and the subsequent ecstasy, or whether knowledge kills this sensation. Does knowledge, the hallmark of our poisoned society, preclude a man from successfully completing "the quest of lost time and places ... of capturing, of isolating a quality of awareness and delight in order to provide the core of life with warmth and light"/p.235/<sup>32</sup>? This is a problem which Gunn will continue to explore for twenty years, changing his appreciation of it as a result of World War II and the destructive forces of which it was an expression. In this particular novel, the answer is that it is possible, at least, for a fisherman or a scientist like Kenn, the only occupations, Gunn claims, which do not drain man of his natural splendor to attain the lost joy.

In his journey upstream, Kenn eventually leaves the area which has been touched by his ancestors and reaches the salmon-spawning grounds. With all human relationship gone, and passing the last manifestation of natural life--the spawning grounds--Kenn enters what Gunn calls the non-human in himself and in the moor. He sees the green linnet which





symbolizes the search of the young boy for joy or beauty in some way bodying forth the Absolute, and later, his passions having been purged away by the journey, he sees the hinds. At the source, Loch Braighe na h'Aibhhe, all conflicts are reconciled and he possesses at-one-ment, a timeless harmony, for he has begun to perform man's greatest poaching foray, an unending spiritual drive to an inconceivable waterhead. Now he can bow his head and begin to comprehend what lies in his heart and mind--the estate of the mystic, the end of a pilgrimage to Lake Manas.

Whereas Morning Tide is a rather shapeless novel without an inevitable climax and finish, for it is indeed a slice of life, in Highland River we have a very strictly controlled patterning of the book's events into the archetypal pattern of the quest. This pattern is going to recur again and again in Gunn's works, and when we note the success or failure, the general quality of the search or journey, we will be able to gauge the fluctuations of Gunn's philosophy of existence and the success of his attempt to give a pattern of living to all men.

What factors affect this quest? What other mythic elements are present in the novel? The male characters in the novel are not important, for Gunn's vision becomes focused on the solitariness of man except for the ties with the mother-woman figure. Men are not the exaggerated heroic figures that





appear in Morning Tide, but rather possess a quiet dignity and stature that will become characteristic of the Highlander in Gunn's later novels as an ideal of man, not belittled by a degrading occupation or poisoned by the almost universal corruption of civilization. A balance between the two conceptions of man expressed in the two books under discussion is struck in the figures of Roddy and Finn in a later novel, Silver Darlings [1941], where one has realistic figures slightly larger than life-size.

In Highland River we have the further development of the woman-figure, a figure eschewing the image of the Gaelic-heroic woman that is Kirsty, and developing the earth goddess type which Gunn tentatively sketches in Mrs MacBeth. To Kenn, both as child and man, his mother, like the river and the earth, lasts from eternity to eternity and represents not only the principle of all human life, being the Great Mother Goddess, but also the existence of the Celtic race. As the centre of the home, Kenn sees her as "the figure that tended the fire and dispensed life." [p. 97]<sup>33</sup> It was to her that the boy brought his first rabbit as an offering when he became aware of something in her which transcended the religion of his people, something greater than place and time, recognizing the inexorable nature of the needs of daily life. As Kenn states in terms with religious connotations, this awareness gathered mythological value through the years until, beyond



the creeds invented by man, she is recognized as "the mother that abides from everlasting to everlasting." [p.97]<sup>34</sup> She is both the symbol of her race, containing all their experience and the representative of nature before the time of man, the ever-abiding earth deity.

All the history of her people is writ on her face. The grey seas are stilled in her eyes; danger and fear are asleep in her brows; want's bony fingers grow warm at her breast; quietly against the quiet trees the struggle of the days lies folded in her hands.

He can see her there in the moment of calm between struggle and struggle; in his generation and in the generation before, and far back beyond that till the ages are lost in the desert and she becomes the rock that throws its shadow in a weary land. [p.99]<sup>35</sup>

Just as the salmon returns to his birthplace, so does the man return to his, for he returns to the desert place and continues past the loch to the mountain beyond. Gunn begins to see life as following a cyclical pattern--man comes from and returns to the earth.

While one has this cyclical view of time, which connotes continuity and passage of time, one also has, in the novel, a concept of what the novelist calls instantaneous time--all time is telescoped into one eternal moment, so that Kenn can say, "I am the Pict." When life is viewed from this angle, the search for the lost joy becomes not an escapist tendency into a sentimental view of the past and nature, but rather a spiritual examination to rediscover a lost facet of one's personality, of the human personality. The feeling of



identity with an influence of past men becomes an integral motivating force in the search. So ancestors loom large in this novel where civilized man stands continually on the brink of the atavistic or primeval.

Taking a quick survey of Gunn's use of history and anthropology, we can see the extensive use of them in this novel. For example, in the first chapter concerning the first salmon fight, we have the reliving of the experience of primitive man as Kenn uses undressed stones in his madness to rush, hit and kill the great salmon. In his struggle, he is led by his instincts which are stimulated by his ancestors, overcoming both his primal and social fear. Not only his "hunting ancestors of the Caledonian Forest" /p. 8/36 came at him out of the grey dawn, but also the whole social and cultural milieu of the race as is seen in the adult society around him.

Though in Chapter VII, Kenn questions the arguments on the effect of tradition and environment in determining the emotions and reactions of man, Gunn is convinced of the unity of modern man with his ancestors. Kenn has an "evasive light, a fugitive smile, secretive as those dark Picts who left, as their record of thousands of years of habitation of that land, his own slim dark-eyed body" /p. 84/37 Having been initiated into the state of manhood of the hunters, the boys--Ken and his friend--are one with the past and can intuitively understand it, for example, Kenn knows the aboriginal Iberians,





and is certain that secretive laughter is their main attribute, as it is his when performing the rites of manhood such as hunting. In the shadow of the brochs and, joined to them, symbolizing the continuity of the folk, the ruins of crofts deserted during the Clearances, the boys are made aware of their blood inheritance or communion when they take part in the fire-lust dance and the challenging of the fire at the time of the fallishes or heath fires. Heath smoke evokes for Kenn countless ages of men hunting, trekking across the land, of communal life for immense stretches of time, and the primrose evokes the golden age, which Gunn feels was the early period of man before he was tainted by civilization.

Turning from the concept of time as a circle or as an eternal moment, Gunn develops, as is appropriate in this book, the concept of time and the life of man as a river. In the fable of God and the old woman, Gunn sees human existence as a river flowing undisturbed by God who is given a glass of milk, the essence of life, by the old woman, another emanation of the great mother goddess who presides over the river, over life.

Some developments can be seen in the six years between Morning Tide and Highland River in the use of myth and history by Gunn. In the former, we have a slice of life heavily toned up with the heroic ideal and some tentative steps towards creation of mythic figures such as the mother-woman and the boy-



hunter. Mythology and history enter the work but do not appear to be an integral part of life in the work. However, in Highland River, we have the story and the physical surroundings subordinated to the mythic patterning. The book describes the quest of the boy-hunter spurred on by ancestors and by the mother. The effect of environment, history, prehistory, and mythology on man is strictly controlled, so that everything bears on the search. To justify and explain the quest, Gunn introduces elements or motifs which will become part of his own created mythology, his own metaphysical view of life and his solution of life's problems. These elements include the poisoned world which we had noted as foreshadowed in Morning Tide, an element which increasingly impinges on Gunn's world in the later novels, or the moment of joy or ecstasy -- always connected to the primeval, to secret atavistic laughter. One can see more clearly how he is mapping out his own mythology or mythic pattern of life when one compares the incidents and characters which are delineated in these two early novels and note their similarity to later novels and in particular to Gunn's universalized experience--his semi-autobiography, Atom of Delight.

The early prewar novels, of which Morning Tide and Highland River are representative, are important for the examples they give of the novelist trying his hand at using myth and history and also for disclosing his state of mind which at



this time is basically optimistic. Hugh triumphs over Bill and Jock from Seabrae; Kenn, despite his knowledge and experience of the poisoned world, reaches the source of the river and presumably has the ability to apply the refound warmth and wisdom to life. The early pieces also show the genesis of Gunn's own mythology which will be based on elements such as the corrupt civilization, the poisoned man who symbolizes the civilization, the poisoned moment and its opposite, the moment of delight, for which the hero searches all his life.



## CHAPTER III

## THE NOVELS OF THE WAR PERIOD

Gunn continued writing through the war years, gradually developing his technique. It is evident in Young Art and Old Hector [1942] and The Green Isle of the Great Deep [1944] that he is changing the emphasis of his use of myth and history from a mere characterizing of a past era or a static situation. Here he moulds myth and history anew to contemporary situations. He increasingly frees himself from the narrowly provincial facet of myth to create a more general mythic patterning or ordering of life. He adds his own modifications to create his own mythic pattern of life, developing personal mythic elements such as the corrupt civilization, the poisoned man and the poisoned moment, and the quest for a moment of delight, of which we have seen the genesis in the earlier novels.

Young Art and Old Hector may appear, at least superficially, to be very similar to its predecessors, because Gunn uses again the figure of the boy in a Highland setting with the same basic events as he had employed in Morning Tide and Highland River. However, we can see a different emphasis in the mythic and historical elements used. Take, for example,





the figure of the mother who was so important in the first two novels we have already examined. Apart from passing comments on the basic wisdom of woman, and a scene of the mother as dispenser and centre of life which is strongly reminiscent of similar scenes in Highland River and Morning Tide, there is little said of her as a figure, exceeding in dimensions or quality the normal bounds of an individual personality. Rather this novel is concerned with life in a tribal environment; with the initiation through education of youth by the elders of the tribe into wisdom and the estate of manhood. This education falls into several categories, the history of the race, the role of man as hunter, and the traditional wisdom which is based on that area of mythology dealing with Cuchulainn and Finn.

Old Hector, at the point of death, wishes to pass on the knowledge of his little Highland world to the child in order that the knowledge, thus transmitted, will continue to give life to that world. Because Hector remembers the Clearances which took place in his youth, a knowledge of the significance of the Clearances is naturally a large part of the heritage he gives the boy. At the Clash, among the ruined crofts, Hector recreates the life and goodness that was once there before rapacious clan chiefs pushed Hector and his people out to settle further downstream on poorer land. The power of the landlord, as wielded by the Ground Officer, is still held



over the heads of the dispossessed, because, as Hector tells Art, if the factor knew of Donul's expedition to poach salmon, his entire family would be turned off the land and out of their home, if not imprisoned. Not only does Old Hector recount past times--the ancient anger, but Donul does so too, when he prepares to take Art on his first salmon hunt. Though, as Hector states, "Force, brute force, and greed had passed this way and raped the living houses ....[p. 89]<sup>1</sup> the old man, the last survivor of the Clash folk, bears no bitterness, and this attitude, this superior wisdom, is contrasted at the meeting in Hector's croft with the attitude of the younger men who scorn the compliancy of their forebears in not withstanding the factor, the police, and the troops. Hector, though feeling "the ancient anger at the loss of the good land"[p. 88]<sup>2</sup>, justly reproves the materialism of his critics, telling the traditional story of the three sons. This recounting of stories is common in the book, because in a tribal society, such as Gunn is portraying, this is often the only manner of transmitting the traditional wisdom or morality of the race. Art is educated into this knowledge at the ceilidh in Martha's home and by Old Hector when he uses riddles and anecdotes such as the universal folk-tale of no-one and the giant, which appears even in The Odyssey. Another folk-lore or mythic strand which runs through the book concerns Finn and Cuchulainn, and their fighting prowess and wisdom is compared by



Art and Hector. The way that Finn gained wisdom through eating the salmon of wisdom who had in turn gained it by eating the nuts of knowledge, Hector relates to Art and the legend forms the transition between this book and The Green Isle of the Great Deep. Art accepts Finn and Cuchulainn as having been boys like himself, boys whom he can emulate to achieve the same greatness. He knows also the clumps of rushes, tom luachrach, in which is hidden the treasure of the Fenians. Whilst one Christianized Gaelic tradition claims that the fairies are fallen angels, another older tradition claims that they are the Fenians, the followers of Finn. It is the fairies that Art enlists to his aid to deal with Henry James. The children of the Feinn, or the fairies, known as changelings, were placed in human cradles in exchange for human offspring. Art wants this substitution to take place so he can rid himself of the envied Henry James. However, Art, himself, appears to Old Hector as a changeling "cold and fey" [p. 58]<sup>3</sup> with eyes "inscrutable and alien", [p. 59]<sup>4</sup> so he too is a child or descendent of the heroes. Associated with this changeling quality is a feeling of guilt which is no individual quality of Art, but rather the common burden of the race, a type of original guilt or sin, in some way connected to the end of the Golden Age, when the heroes were forced to sleep under the earth where they formerly had held sway. Old Hector at times sees Art as bearing all the guilt of





humanity: "man the outcast, strange in himself." /p. 102/5

Hector knows intuitively that it is to overcome this essential solitariness of men that the tribe or clan, as a tightly organized society, exists with its traditional knowledge, by which to battle and conquer life, passed on by the elders.

It is appropriate that in this tale, where there is such an emphasis on the education of the boy, other aspects of the spiritual or superstitious life of the Highlanders, besides those concerning the fairies, Finn and Cuchulainn, should be introduced. The urisk or oorishk, the hairy creature that is half-beast, half-man, is mentioned in the episode where Art discovers the illicit distillers, Old Hector, Donul and Red Dougal. The butterfly in the Gaelic language had divine associations and considerable use is made of its symbolism in a central scene in Silver Darlings. In that book, Catrine's son, Finn, chases a butterfly, God's fool, and kills it. This is the end of innocence for Finn; for the first time he feels guilt, and is overcome with tears. It is like mortally wounding one's soul, tantamount to imprisoning Kenn's green linnet. Gunn uses the butterfly as an image of the soul, of the core of delight, of the primeval with man, which man attempts to capture and hold for his whole life. On one level it is the physical symbol of the moment of delight. There is in Young Art and Old Hector a reference to the chasing of a butterfly in the chapter, "The Knife, the Glass Ball, and the



Penny". The incident can be quite satisfactorily interpreted on a literal level with no reference to previous use by Gunn of the butterfly chase. However, one could interpret the passage as Art pursuing his moment of delight, chasing his soul, for which Old Hector praises him, instead of indulging in natural life as symbolized by dalliance with Mary Ann.

Another of the categories of education of a youth undertaken by the tribe or the elders is in the field of hunting, the man's occupation. This theme of the hunter is introduced in Chapter I where Donul and Hamish bring Old Hector a grilse. Old Hector, as the mentor of young Art, is himself proficient in hunting and he responds like other men, but more sensitively and fully, to this experience:

The first run of the grilse! The words had the sound and the light of the first mornings of the world; they were younger than Art and older than Finn MacCoul; they held him to a trance that was bright with wisdom and sad with the sweet sadness of peace. /p. 21/6

He is a fitting guide to take Art on his first trip to the fabulous Hazel Pool at the River. But it is Art's brother, Donul, who actually initiates the boy into hunting--in this case, rabbit snaring rather than salmon poaching. When Art tells Old Hector of the expedition, he uses expressions his mother would not have approved. By not reprimanding him, Hector intimates the boy's accession to man's estate. Nevertheless, he is not yet fully educated, as he does not experience the feelings of Donul when they go to collect the snared



rabbits.

Art saw this exultation of the hunter and was deeply moved by it. The fear of that which might pounce upon them was there too. /p. 74/7

The child becomes a man and will in time return, like Hector, to the state of childhood in his old age. The circle of life seen in Highland River is repeated here with a slight variation--instead of clay to clay, we see the potential circle of child to child contained in Art and Hector. Both ages, childhood and old age, have the rapt wonder before the world, though age makes the wonder selfless and altogether clear. And as Hector thinks, "This vision of the circle completing itself was all the mind desired, so marvellous it was, and supporting the vision came a feeling of such wellbeing that panic or time could no more intrude." /p. 87/8

Knowledge being the ultimate goal of man, Hector starts Art off in life by giving him a vision of the possession of knowledge that brings the feeling of well-being:

"... I know every corner of this land, every little burn and stream, and even the boulders in the stream. And I know the moors and every lochan on them. And I know the hills, and the passes, and the ruins, and I know of things that happened here on our land long long ago, and men who are long dead I knew, and women. I knew them all. They are part of me. And more than that I can never know now." /p. 250/9

Further on he states:

"It's not the size of the knowing that matters... it's the kind of the knowing. If, when you know a thing, it warms your heart, then it's a friendly knowing and worth the having. In any case, you remember it, and it will stay with you to the end of your days." /p. 250/10





And it is to continue gathering knowledge that the two set out for the river. On the way, Hector tells of the bothy near the stone cists at the head of the burn. He also speaks of the poisoned element in life, a cruelty, which is the worst of all human sins, which is the core of people's desire for possessions and power, which causes people to be set upon, driven from their homes, dying in want and suffering. When Old Hector and Young Art fall through the Hazel Pool and reach the Green Isle of the Great Deep, they experience a cruelty which results in a new knowledge and wisdom.

Young Art and Old Hector, a bildungsroman, has less of Gunn's own vision of life in it than has Highland River. There is little or no development of Gunn's own mythic patterns that we have noticed developing in Highland River. Rather this novel appears to be a side exploration, applying the tribal experience to life. However, the interest in knowledge as the end of life and the accompanying interest in human cruelty and human integration and unity foreshadows a major postwar Gunnian preoccupation. The feeling of unity, implicit in the whole tribal situation and explicit in the statements of Old Hector to Young Art, is also an important theme in the later novels. But the great importance of what is being done in this book is that it creates a stable world which Gunn uses as a reference point, a metaphysical North Star, for the reader to place Gunn's vision of a disintegrated world which appears in





the later novels. It is presented as a contrast to his vision of a rotten-ideal world, such as we see in The Green Isle of Great Deep, a world superficially unified and integrated.

The Green Isle is the Celtic paradise, and this fact is the basis of the main paradox of the book, for Gunn sees paradise as evil, especially when tampered with by man. Writing during the War, in which different species of totalitarian paradises fought, supported by free countries who had temporarily adopted totalitarian measures in order to fight, Gunn condemns all forms of control of mind and body, condemns the use of head untempered by heart, of knowledge that is not developed into wisdom. This he does in a Utopian fantasy built on a curious blend of Celtic and Biblical mythology and on his own imaginative construction of a rotten-ideal paradise run by intellects who create Hell through logic and a desire for efficiency or perfection.

The story begins at Clachdrum, the tightly-knit society of Young Art and Old Hector. To this out-of-the-way place has filtered the news of the mental brutality disclosed everywhere during the War, far surpassing mere physical brutality of events within the ken of these Highlanders, such as that of the Clearances. At the ceilidh at Old Hector's house, there is revulsion, a horror of what Gunn calls the brutal ideal, symbolized by the discussion of concentration camps in Tom's newspaper, for men's attack on the minds of other



men aroused a feeling of disgusting uncleanness, producing a feeling of impotence, of a desire to vomit against the disintegrating, degrading corrosion. It is this breaking-down of the human mind with which Art and Hector battle in the Green Isle.

In order to transpose his characters from the real world to the Green Isle, Gunn utilizes a myth which eventually provides a key to the solution of the tale, that of the salmon of wisdom and the hazel nuts of knowledge. The salmon of wisdom eat nuts which fall from the overhanging trees into the pool beneath. The salmon must in turn be caught by man in everyman's pool in the river of life in order that man might be wise. Art brings down the hazel nuts from the trees with Hector's help and by the end of the book the two have captured the coveted salmon, thus gaining wisdom, the final act of the tribal initiation of Young Art and Old Hector, an initiation which can last a lifetime. However, the salmon is not to be caught without considerable danger, for the pool in which it lies is deep and its darkness impenetrable. Hector asserts that the pool will easily drown one, but man's instinct leads him on, despite the possibility of his being overwhelmed in the search. This spiritual instinct has its counterpart on a more literal level in the description of Art and Hector's racial instinct for the hunt, for the capture of the salmon. Hector, who at the moment before the



final strike, could tell "of many things and times of long ago", (p. 23)<sup>11</sup> all of life, tells Art that through the water is the way, actually the only way, to reach the Celtic paradise. Hector's and Art's journey for wisdom is achieved through a common device known to anthropologists or folklorists, that of death by water which always leads to some type of regeneration, as in Eliot's The Wasteland.

Once in the Green Isle, they are informed that they have enough to pay for their keep despite their lack of money. The price they will be charged is their complete obedience, their minds. This obedience means accepting the post-Change paradisaical world in which the fruit is forbidden because it is poisonous. This fruit hangs on trees which are identified by Old Hector as partaking of the nature of both the Biblical tree of knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life. The fruit is simultaneously a life-giving fruit, without which the people become the shallow-laughing inhabitants of the Green Isle whose thoughts travel on the surface of their faces, and a fruit which is death-dealing, the forbidden fruit of knowledge. The fruit's properties depend on the parties using the fruit. Whilst the inhabitants were, as Robert states, in a state of ignorance, the fruit was vital. The Perfectionists, newly arrived from earth, turned the fruit into poison and all people had to abstain from unprocessed food. This paradoxical nature of the fruit becomes for Old Hector a greater mystery





than that of the forbidden fruit of the Garden of Eden. But for the waywardness, the disobedience, the naturalness of Art, the two friends would have lost their minds. In this whole concept of the fruit, we have Gunn working out the problem of ignorance and knowledge in relation to evil, the problem of life and death instincts. Though disobedience is evil, yet so is obedience when man's efforts become directed to a fulfilment of the death instinct. The book becomes a series of paradoxes. For example, the fruit is simultaneously good and evil. A further example of paradox is the unusual blending of the Garden of Eden, earth, and heaven, an odd telescoping of different times and space into one entity. The people, because of their allegiance to human values, fall from life and ignorance to knowledge and a poisoned existence. The only woman who stands outside the community of people that Hector likens to shells on a strange shore is Mary Campbell. Just as the Virgin Mary is the second Eve restoring man to Paradise, so Mary Campbell restores, with the help of her adopted son, Art, her people to a state of paradise. Like Gunn's other women, she is the source and centre of life. Her husband says of her that she is a woman:

"And a woman always fights not for a theory, not for a system, but for life. For dear life! In that fight, she'll lie and be treacherous with extreme cunning. She doesn't care about words like lying and treachery. They're our words, not hers, anyway. She just fights for dear life.... Mary there is now prepared to bring down all heaven in small



pieces about our feet, whatever should come of it."  
/p. 91/12

Being on the side of life, Mary it is who discovers the herb jelly which, by neutralizing the poison in men's system, enables men to live of the fruit again. After her ordeal of reorientation or "brain-washing" at the Seat, which is the provincial capital, during which she deceives her inquisitors, Hector recognizes her as the life principle:

Here at last was Woman, who for the warmth of life and for the love that sprang out of life and made life, would fight till the stars went down in their courses and rose no more. Here in her weary presence was the child who had been destroyed on earth. All the children who had been destroyed on earth lay quiet in the pallor of her skin and lay asleep in the wells of her eyes.

.....  
In this woman only had life, as he had known life, striven to be born again. /pp. 201-202/13

Morag, Art's sister still on earth, is identified with Mary the mother in the Green Isle, for Morag is the Gaelic equivalent of Mary, and it is also said of her that her concern is life.

Since the Green Isle is a perverted paradise, we have in it the figure of a poisoned woman who balances the mother figure. Sweet Innocence had been a sniper, having killed one hundred and seventy-two men and wounded one. Hector, told of her, is weakened and sickened by her, for she is utterly beyond his view of woman, personified by Mary. This horror of woman, of the goddess in her hag-aspect, is common in Gunn,



for he feels that all hope is lost for men if women descend to men's level and destroy life instead of protecting and nurturing it. When Old Hector first sees Sweet Innocence, she is attending a lesson in atomic psychology given by the Questioner, so she is associated with the corrosive knowledge and breakdown of the mind which is attacked in the book. Axle, the unimaginative, inhuman scientist, represents this corrosive scientific, analytical knowledge, whereas Mark represents the overpowering desire to break up the mind and will. The two men symbolize the menacing forces which have turned Heaven into Hell. Hector believes that, regardless of physical mistreatment, a man still has his mind. However, Robert denies this, claiming that the mind is castrated at the Seat:

"There is a thing called an atom. Scientists, they say, change its nature by knocking something out of its centre. Here the atom is the mind. Its centre is the will. When they knock out that centre, the mind can still work, just as a horse that has been cut can work--in fact the brute works best and most obediently when he has been cut." /p.114/14

To Hector, this is sheer horror. The horror the Highlanders felt at the news in Tom's newspaper is felt by Old Hector when he contemplates his interview with the Questioner:

In prospect, the questioning was a torture more terrible than any other kind of torture. For torture one can bear to the human limit, but when its end is not the suffering of torture, but the degradation of the spirit in treachery, then is born a vileness that no eternity can wash out. /p.138/15

Can anything stop this disintegration of the mind? Most minds





being disintegrated on arrival at the Green Isle by the state of civilization in the world, are glad to accept the unity of mind and soul offered by the Administrators. However, Art and Hector, coming from a tightly-knit society, have a primal unity of mind, so that they resist the intrusions of the Questioner. The Questioner, coming up against the intractability of Old Hector, feels that there is an untouchable core, a final coil of the serpent in the old man, that is primitive, mythological, as he terms it, and which, being irrational, is beyond his reach. The lust of questing for this essence of the primitive mind comes on the Questioner. He desires to reach the region in Hector where is achieved "a primitive integration, a certain living wisdom." /p. 154/ <sup>16</sup> He pursues Hector till he reduces him to an animal, until he pushes him too far and is challenged. "The whole primordial world stood still, this world, and all the universe of men and time." /p. 155/ <sup>17</sup> Reasserting his humanity, Hector asks to see God. The Questioner, refusing to acknowledge his defeat, rationalizes Hector's inalcitrance by explaining it away by tribal concern for Art, the persistence of the simple primitive.

In the "perfect society" created by the Administrators, obedience is demanded, not freely given. Paradoxically, the problem of man's disobedience and fall, subsequent change and progress, is important in this Heaven, yet surely Heaven is a state of eternal stasis, beyond concern of man's past





fall. Disobedience is extended to include the desire to question, to see God. The man who desires to see God is shown his wickedness, and retracts his request. It becomes paradoxical that in Heaven, in the state of perfection, there should exist those who are supposedly imperfect or evil. Left in the hands of the Perfectionists, paradise moves even further from God to the point that belief in God is regarded as superstition by Axle. The scientist idealized in Highland River is condemned here, for Axle is the sneering scientist who would easily degenerate to brutality, to physical means to break a man. It was the scientists who brought about the Change, because of their theories of population and the given size of the Green Isle.

This society of hollow men, ruled by a pernicious, self-esteeming, self-created bureaucracy, is the hideous travesty of perfection. The Administration's failure to deal with Art and Old Hector brings about the restoration of the Green Isle to a paradisaal state. God, roused from his meditations, casts aside his lieutenants, including the Questioner, who have been unworthy servants and revamps the society of perfection in which there was no need for kindness. The Administrators are rejected by God, because though they have knowledge, they have no wisdom, no knowledge of the heart, whereas Old Hector is accepted because he possesses wisdom. God, explaining to Hector, during their interview, the divorce of head and heart



intellect and spirit, which makes life sterile and bitter, unites wisdom and knowledge for men in His interpretation for Hector of the legend of the nuts and salmon, a legend created by men to express essential truths. Two world visions, one based on knowledge, and the other on wisdom, are presented. The first is expressed by the Newcomer who tells the Questioner of an earth which will be ruled by propaganda and refined secret police, by psychology, rather than by outdated physical force. His aim was also order and obedience, which he wished to guarantee by machinery similar to that used in the Green Isle, though, as he claims, on earth one did not have to contend with God. The destruction of the concept of freedom, of individuality, is discussed, and Gunn, through the Newcomer, stresses the dangerous developments towards totalitarianism in supposedly free countries. In opposition to this kind of world is that world envisaged by Old Hector during his interview with God. Instead of a world run by the Administrators, a world left to the knowledge of the head, a desolated world, in which the fruit is processed and the salmon canned, there could be a world ruled by wisdom, a blend of both heart and head, for wisdom haunts man. As Hector realizes, the "mathematician knew the direction; the saint knew the way. Too long had the headhunters ruled them without mercy, turning their mathematics in the direction of death and their saintliness to the way of disintegration in the atomic psychology



chamber."/p. 245/18

What the eventual resolution of the struggle of knowledge and wisdom on earth will be is unknown, but in the Green Isle God sets up a council of wise elders like a tribal council and then He again withdraws to His meditations. This standing back of God reminds one of the fable of the old woman and the river of life used in Highland River.

The novel is generally optimistic in tone, there being a hope in the development of wisdom. Art and Hector restore the fruit of life to paradise, but only with the help of God, and land the salmon of wisdom. Gunn still hoped that men, taught by their experience during World War II, would turn their backs on destructive logic and rationality, on the poisoned element in life.

The way to salvation Gunn sees in the mythic, what is scoffingly called the primitive. We have already seen Gunn defending a return to the past, to the hidden moment of ecstasy and delight. In The Green Isle of the Great Deep, he makes his great apology for his solution. The criticism comes mainly from Axle, who exists in a scientific strait-jacket, unable to comprehend or respect anything beyond his experience:

The patient and enduring peasant!  
How old the conception! How much has been written  
about it by intellectual man! How much idealism had  
been poured into this static blankness! Extraordinary!  
Axle saw it all--the myth created by the intellectual





who, incomplete in himself, needs "something".  
 (/p. 51/19

The Questioner, speaking to the Head, comparing the construction of a corporate social and economic state to that of a corporate mind, condemns regressions to a state of individuality:

The stuff of the hunter's wood; the irrational; the jungle. Perfectly understandable for that primitive age, but on earth today to sing the individual hunter, the individualist, is not only a clear piece of atavism, but the worst kind of atavism--that which is weakly romanticised, idealised. It is not a genuine going back to a lower culture pattern, which would be understandable, though it would mean annihilation. It is the weak wish--without any possible fulfilment. It is a sickness that inevitably breeds war--but new meaningless war. (/p. 196/20

There is no explicit answer to this type of criticism in the novel, but an answer implicit in the rejection of the spokesmen of this point of view, in the sympathy of the author for Art who symbolizes the free, primitive or the individualized. In sentences such as, "In the mind no longer susceptible to myth, logic takes myth's place," (/p. 130/21 there is an implicit condemnation of the scornful view of myth, for merely human logic or knowledge, as Gunn has shown us in the theories, for example, of the Perfectionists, is the worm in the apple of paradise.

The novel is not only an implicit defence of Gunn's use of myth and the folk experience of the Gaelic race, but is also a defence of the artist who is the prototype of the individual resisting efforts at incorporation into a mediocre mass,



at regimentation, resisting "thou shalt not" decrees that restrict life. Art, in his wanderings, becomes a legend--a story to be told by poets--until God hears of him. Art is identified with Finn for he has eaten the salmon of wisdom, though Art later admits that he felt he never really received the wisdom, and the hazel nuts of knowledge Art recognizes as not being sufficient. Art is also Cuchulainn, the wonder boy with the hounds. But Art is more than the immortal boy, Finn and Cuchulainn, for the theoreticians of the other regions see him as a representative of the activities of certain humans who are a continual source of trouble. Here Gunn launches into a delightful self-satire, reproducing society's view of the artist. The alternate theory identifies Art with King Arthur of Celtic myth and sees the whole story of Art's exploits as the personification of a primitive legendary hope. Thus, writing in a period of stringent censorship and restraint, of the abandonment of arts for the supposedly more important activity of war, Gunn puts up an impassioned case in defence of art and its life-restoring properties, of the value of the individual and an attack on the pervading worship of rationality and scientism. Also attacked is totalitarianism as Gunn issues a warning contained in the parable of the fall of the paradisal world to his contemporaries in the so-called free countries to beware of becoming like their opponents.

As Highland River is a good example of Gunn creating a



mythic patterning for life, so The Green Isle of the Great Deep is a good novel for studying how Gunn is applying myth to life, how he is creating a new mythology, in this case a blend of Celtic and Christian mythology, and Gunn's own mythic scheme. In Highland River, we do not feel the press of a contemporary problem on the author. However, The Green Isle of the Great Deep is a deliberate response to the War. Its utilization of myth may not be as neat as that in Highland River, but this very complexity and paradox in the use of myth does show an honest attempt of the writer to deal with the surrounding chaos, to offer a solution, nebulous though it may be, to the world. The solution seems to be an acquiring of wisdom through a blend of knowledge, tolerance, increased sympathy, and the achievement of an integrated personality. Wisdom applied to life will presumably reclaim the poisoned civilization.

Elements in this novel, such as the tribal feeling, the education of youth by age through the medium of traditional knowledge, the figure of the woman, all take the reader back to previous works. The same feeling for time is expressed--all time is compressed into an eternal stasis--

... this was the end of the same day. This was yesterday and it was tomorrow. This day always happened and would happen. The same day. [p.184/22

However, at this point, we have crossed a continental divide in Gunn's work. The world of Young Art and Old Hector becomes an ideal which is scarcely attainable for the novelist's



postwar characters. Whereas, in Highland River, Kenn could recapture fully the basic joy of life, the later heroes are in some way crippled, almost unable to make the transition meaningfully back to the source of the good. Gunn's later novels can be seen as optimistic or pessimistic, according to the relative failure or success of his questing heroes to refind the value of the world shown in Young Art and Old Hector and turn it to counteract the poison. The battle against the death instinct, against the poisoned moment, becomes an affair of dubious resolution.





## CHAPTER IV

## THE NOVELS OF CHAOS

Patterns or explanations of life drawn from Celtic mythology are, for Gunn, viable in the pre-1939 world in which there was still some cohesion and unity and less madness than in the post-1939 era. The problem before us is whether the postwar novels do not betray the inadequacy of Gunn's earlier answers. As we have spoken much of Gunn's personal myth of the poisoned world and the poisoned moment, before beginning an examination of four of Gunn's postwar novels, we shall look at his discussion of the poison, which he presents in Atom of Delight /1956/.

The poisoned moment that exists on its essence can become a cult like any other, and by the nature of it an exquisite cult. Some modern French literature knows this. Curiosity can stick a knife through a palm and examine the wound from time to time to see how the gangrene grows. To be aborted or not to be, that is the woman's question, and a man moves beneath its lowering skies like a hen in thunder trying to achieve the indifference of a bootless cock. Here is the tragedy of life as it exists and communicates itself in the essential now. The agony is so agonizing that it curls upon itself and would lick its sores if there was any point in licking its sores. But there is no point, not anywhere. All is pointless. So the sores grow and violence is an ever present help, for it can rapidly make them grow bigger, and the bigger the better for the more readily then can they communicate one with another. Where all is one living sore, plotting sore points becomes a



metaphysical exercise. In a metaphysical exercise pain is no longer present as felt but as an idea. The greater the brutality the richer the field of ideas. More scope; opportunity widens. Fascinating deviations appear. Some cry to the dumb sky; others kick the sky in the belly; still others just kick the belly. Integration is in the hermaphrodite. Man ceases to love his fellow woman and loves his fellow man in a revised version of an old commandment. But always it is the fellow who has the brass tacks in his boots and kicks the other chap in the belly who is the key character in the basic story. Refinements upon this story provide an infinite complexity for the exercise of a subtle and penetrating and exquisite art.

But that is a highly civilized art, city art. There are those beyond the urban walls who live in the depths of the country. From their dark dens they stalk, inarticulate, across the sombre landscape of the regional novel. The old barbarian is the new moron, and the new moron is the peasant, the archetype of the brutal before the brutal got brains. His hunger is in his prowl, his covetousness in his eye, his greed in the dark impenetrable intricacies of his bowels where all that matters is digested until the plot requires indigestion. /pp. 217-218/1

It is this absurd world that Gunn clothes in a fictional mode in The Shadow/1948/, a novel of the disintegrating effects of the poisoned violent world on the mind of a young woman, Nan, who returns to the country in order to recuperate, to find the light again, and who finds brutality and destruction even in that setting.

The poisoned outside world is symbolized by the Socialist intellectuals, like Know-all and Ranald, who, bound up in their theories, lose touch with life. Having lost sympathy with the vital aspect of existence, they, "the sly destructive ones," /p. 7/2 become possessed by the death instinct, which is ex-



pressed through what Nan calls their "unbearable craving for the final obliterating crash,"/p.48/3 and through the destructive logic that analyzes life to death, that leprous logic that has an "inexorable and devastating power"./p.9/4 Nan is broken by these intellectuals, because she is basically not one of them. During her recovery, she is identified as a modified mother figure, as a woman passionately on the side of life and its vivifying emotions. Throughout the novel, but especially in the first part, there is a continuous contrast between her fervent allegiance to life and Ranald's theories and intellect. Though she is mentally aware of the truth of his political beliefs, she reiterates an eternal 'but'. Speaking of the "awful smugness in the voice of the analyst,"/p.19/5 and the corresponding smugness of the Party's definition of freedom as "the recognition of necessity," /p.19/6 she gives the lie to the smug assurance and sufficiency of the intellectuals' solution thus:

But it's true? Of course! As true as true can be. But oh! with its philosophic highbrowism, how smug! Just plain smug. I know that will annoy you completely, even anger you a little, for haven't whole books, brilliant and earnest works, been written with this definition as the most marvellous all-round tin-opener of our wonder age? They have indeed. I bow-- and glance through my long and, I hope, attractive lashes. /p.19/7

The tenor of her refusal to see thought or rationality as the sole necessary element of life here is light and bantering. It can become nightmarish and horrifying:





And I'm afraid, Ran, of those who think and think only. That's a foolish way to put it. We need efficiency, we need certainty, we need thought more than anything. Scientific analysis and construction. Yes, yes, yes. If only we could also keep our eyes real eyes. What happened when the schoolmaster with the thistledown eyes looked? Horror rose--and shook--and died, and what they looked on, withered. /p. 19/8

She criticizes psychology and psychoanalysis as "a degradation of the spirit, a defilement of the springing source or fountain of life,"/p. 24/9 and for this reason, she claims there have been no great women psychoanalysts for woman's essence is creativity, not unnatural analysis. Women, like God, see that light and life go on.

Through Nan's eyes, we are given a picture of the reactions of the intellectuals to life, in particular, to the emotions. Satirizing them, she sees them as afraid of emotion and therefore as attempting to despise it. She sees them looking down their intellectual noses at the subjective, messy, annoyingly irrational emotion which they find disgusting like a dirty ingrown toenail, which must be cleaned away so that society can be reformed. They are the destroyers from whom the intellect must be rescued. As they fear emotion, they hate the mother figure, though they affect to despise her as "a brainless cow"./p. 35/10

This is the milieu which Nan has to overcome; the shadow which she must clear from the land. To do so, she must come to terms with Adam, the stoat-like man, her alter ego. She identifies him with destructive hunting instincts, with the



shadow which she must clean up. However, he is different from Ranald, because his destructive impulses are those of an animal. He is the hawk eating the petrified blackbird, the stoat stalking the hare in ever-decreasing circles, which, foiled of his prey, seems to spit out primeval oaths in frustrated fury. True, he is possessed by the infernal curiosity, which, through cruelty, leads to "destruction, the death throe"; [p. 65]<sup>11</sup> but he hates the destructive instincts of Ranald, who will not kill until he can "dominate the mind in front of him, to frighten it into gibbering bits." [p. 157]<sup>12</sup> As Adam later tells Aunt Phemie, he saw instantly in Ranald a cold death instinct in the deadly logic and rationality.

In order to come to terms with herself and Adam, Nan, like Kenn, journeys up the river to its source. But, whereas in Highland River, the mythic pattern of the quest upstream ends in fulfilment and self-knowledge for the salmon and Kenn, here in The Shadow, the myth is incomplete. At the source of the river and of herself, Nan finds only death and an unwelcome sexual experience, which throw her back into the horrifying land of neurosis. Unlike Kenn, she cannot find ultimate harmony. It may be that Gunn realizes that the quest upstream pattern does not express life truthfully, hence the apparent breakdown or inconclusive resolution of the pattern of this novel.

Not only does Gunn's mythic patterning appear to break



down in the use of the metaphor of the river, but we can see a further disintegration of Gunn's mythological world in the contrast he sets up between Celtic and Greek myth. Ranald is identified with Kronos and Nan sees herself as attempting desperately to stop him metaphorically eating his offspring, that is destroying his emotions by the action of his intellect. In The Shadow we have the first extensive use of a non-native mythology, and we ought to consider the significance of its introduction. Perhaps we may make a tentative identification of Celtic myth with Nan and with a communal life or unity, and another tentative identification of Greek myth with Ranald and with the individual not belonging to any community. In the early novels of Gunn, one man standing for all humanity successfully follows a Celtic mythic pattern. The problem before us is whether the postwar novels do not betray the inadequacy of Gunn's earlier answers. Does he, as a result, in a novel such as The Shadow, import a foreign mythic pattern? Or is his importation due to his belief that the madness is a foreign element, a death instinct that has filtered in from outside the Gunnian world? Possibly the foreign myth which characterizes Ranald and the other intellectuals is used in order to symbolize the foreign influence which has divorced them from the true life source. Though Nan comes to Scotland to recuperate, little explicit use is made of Celtic myth which could symbolize the heart. This





unusual hiatus in the novel could express Gunn's belief that the heart alone cannot solve the problem of the murderous universe. Nan, ironically, believes that she has solved her problem, having metaphorically touched the bottom of the well of life. However, the change which she has rejoiced to see in Ranald is due, not to his having found the life instinct, but rather to his having given his destructive impulses full rein. But if Gunn has discovered that Celtic myth is too simple to provide an answer to the chaos, he feels that Greek myth is over-intellectualized, is not naïve enough to be any more satisfactory, as can be seen by its dismissal in the novel. No answer to this problem is given in this novel, just as there is no definite answer possible to all problems raised by the role of Greek myth.

The mythic technique of the book reflects the chaos and negativity of the world mirrored in the work. True, there is a slight upswing at the end. We have the picture of the enduring upright men who have been panegyricized in the early books, real men who stoically accept life. One of the final acts of the book is the harvesting, which is seen by Nan as an eternal occupation, enacted by men who become mythic beings--the old earth god and the primitive hunter--who are one with the moon and the sun. There appears to be a positive integration at the end, however, when Nan has refound the basis of life in the well at the bottom of the world which





is the source of life, she has no real knowledge of the task of revitalizing Ranald before her.

When, in 1949, he writes The Lost Chart, Gunn is able to take a more positive view of the world, and therefore is able to return to a more coherent use of Celtic experience as a potential ordering device for life. Again we are confronted with the poisoned world, which is developing into the new Dark Age, represented here by Basil. It is a world of imminent button-pressing, in which one is continually watched by the eyes of fifth columnists, the police, or by such a character as Grear. This world, Gunn believes, is particularly manifest in the city. For in the urban environment, violence is done to man's nature, through what I interpret to be that which Schiller called excessive "differentiation of function", that is, specialization of occupation against which Marx and Ruskin rebelled in the middle of the nineteenth century, and which produces atrophy of man's spirit. The concentrated violence done to man must be spent, and this may take the form of forceful assault on the existing order of society. Given a typical Gunnian hero, a man of intensified sympathy and humanity, what is the course to be taken in order to escape this deadening world? It is the quest for the lost Golden Age. Unlike Nan's quest, Dermot's journey to Cladday will be successful, for he has regained the lost chart, the spiritual sense of direction, which will lead him and his crew back to



primal innocence. Dermot's search, like that of Kenn, is a search for the primordial innocence, which is symbolized in the Gaelic songs of Ellen and the island of Cladday. Unlike Joe and Christina, who are both instinctively aware of the light, Dermot and his contemporaries have been thrown out of the Garden of Eden, and Dermot, at least, is aware that he is in search of it.

Like Kenn and Nan, he is aware that somewhere our river has taken a wrong bed, and in so doing has forced man into an unnatural mode of life. Speaking of the effect of "Caol Muile", he says:

The song--and the singing--had a whole civilization behind it, an attitude to life and to death over a long time. It was what the skipper had felt. It was the voice of Anna, the face of Anna, when she addressed the young moon, smiling across the black river and making her curtsy. The sea and the flowers on the machair; youth and the morning. Twilight. To you also I belonged once but I never can again for I am Youth. It was all there. It had manners. It was bright and sharp, and it grew mellow in age. It was sad to a depth that no lead sounded. Beautiful it was

...  
The polished and sophisticated, the thin reed with its one arid note, the dry reed, dry for want of the living mouth and the human spittle. And we thought it wonderful...

The dry note and the arid reason, and we built a hulk for them, and created the rats so that we might listen to their scurrying sounds, the new symphony, real because it was rats ... [pp. 306-307/13]

Dermot wishes to regain this lost world and Gunn finds it necessary to defend his chronological primitivism and his attempt to return to the Golden Age. Basil, like Axle and the Questioner, brands this attempt as a throw-back, a regression, a



sheer piece of atavism, not even as justifiable as mere escapism, a mere going away. All Gunn asks is this:

Say it, say it once, say it was a beautiful thing that was murdered; even though they have made you feel a fool when you are saying it, say it. Say it once to your own heart, unashamed, before you grow strong again and ordinary and deny it ... /p. 307/14

In answer to Basil's Freudian explanations to counteract the old myth of the Lost Paradise, Dermot says that Basil's Freudian myth of patricide as the source of man's sin and fall is only the substitution of one myth for another. Personally, he prefers the old myth, because the new one, when practised, produces the present destruction:

"The sons are on the rampage again," said Dermot. "They're getting ready to kill all the fathers, so that they may wallow in the total power. When they've finished they'll be haunted by sin once more. It's a wonderful myth." /p. 121/15

This myth of destruction and fall from innocence justifies the violence which Dermot sees around him. The totalitarian methods that Basil would employ to destroy the old myth and society are condemned by Dermot as a regression which is "anthropologically mad", /p. 122/16 because reconstruction is to be by police methods. As he says, man destroys himself when he attempts to return to an earlier cultural pattern, in which he was unquestioning and unthinking. How does one reconcile Dermot's quest for the Lost Paradise with this last statement? Presumably the paradise, which Cladday with its Gaelic culture-pattern symbolizes, is eternally present,





ready to be rediscovered by men. It is not a regression to turn and embrace it, but rather it is analogous to a side step, which puts one back in the right path.

Of the voyage he will take with God's fool, Joe, the bearer of light, and with Ellen and Christina, who each symbolizes the eternal woman, Dermot says:

If the gentry of the crises, the power-addicts and the geo-egoists who cracked the deathly whips, wanted big words, then all right let them have 'em; tell them we're going in search of a real civilization, one of our very own, distinguished by a way of life which had as its economic doctrine and its philosophy, its work and its religion, its duality in unity: a sure hand at the tiller and love behind the wave. If they know of a better, let them produce it. But with hatred at the tiller and cruelty behind the wave, they'll pile the old ship on the skerry as surely as man made the Garden of Gethsemane. That Figure in the garden ... the skipper in the sandy cemetery ... Christina weeping against the railings ... /p.334/17

The need to regain that civilization, to find the way marked on the chart, becomes even more pressing after Grear's announcement of the pending fortification of Cladday. If there survive some men after the final world catastrophe, then there will be a greater need than ever "to know how to salute the face of the God of life, bow to the white moon of the seasons, and find again what was behind the wave...." /p.349/18

Though Dermot has the potential of becoming poisoned because of his human destructive impulses, he is Dermot of the Love Spot, marked out for love, women and life. Thus his chances are good of achieving reintegration in the lost



paradise amidst the impending destruction and death, symbolized for Dermot by the figure of the crucified Christ. Though Gunn has not come full circle yet, his mythic view of life is being painfully re-established. True, the world vision of the poisoned civilization bent on destroying itself is more cataclysmic on a universal scale than the view of the world in The Shadow, but the potential efficacy of Celtic mythology, of the quest for the primordial innocence pattern, is infinitely stronger and surer in this novel than in its predecessor. Gunn appears to be answering within himself the problems of alienation and destructive impulses which characterize the present human condition. It is as if he were thinking aloud, objectifying his clashing ideas into fiction.

The same year in which The Shadow was published, The Silver Bough appeared, presenting a startling contrast to the appalling vision of the damned world, which we have been examining. This book is again built on a quest pattern. Grant starts on a hunt for the unknown, which ends in a search for the crock of gold. Anna, Sheena, and Martin are on the quest for unity, for love, as symbolized in the Silver Bough; they are on the way to the White Shore. Though, as we shall see, the quest is not fully successful, the book is basically optimistic in tone, for the notion of unity of all mankind, a strongly stressed theme in the book, is completely and perfectly realized. The integration and unity which, in the



prewar novels, was expressed through the tribal society, its mythology, history, and ancestors, is here expressed in universal terms. Man is realized by Gunn to be part of the homo sapiens species, rather than just an individual or member of a particular race, for, under various surface differences like colour of skin, hair and eyes, he is shown to be one by the shape of his bones. There are repeated identifications of modern man, like Martin, with primitive man, of the idiot boy with early man, of Anna and Sheena with the skeletons in the short cist, of the urisk with neolithic man, of Fachie with paleolithic hunters following the recession of the last Ice Age, of Grant himself with a paleolithic cave dweller, fearfully and passively awaiting the rising tide, and of Mrs. MacKenzie with legendary archetypal woman. This identification, explicitly made in the above examples, is implicit in the relationships between the characters and between them and the cairn. Consider, for example, the working relationship set up immediately between Andie and Grant, Macintosh and the boys helping on the dig. Observe, too, the interest or sympathy exhibited by the public and the journalists in Andie and the cairn. In part, of course, this interest is evolved by the story of the missing crock, but surely it is also because they intuitively feel as does Andie, and as Grant states to Martin, that there is a basically valid identification of themselves with the cairn builders and occupants. Though





Martin can see only the destructive element in the dismantling of the cairn, that is, the disturbing of the past and the dead, the others know that it is a means to self-knowledge, to a deeper awareness of one's involvement in the human race, an involvement which Martin lacks. So here again, we have the feeling of instantaneous time through personal definition, which Gunn has given us before. It is the feeling of the eternal moment. In The Silver Bough, we have the vastly elaborated statement of Kenn's words in Highland River, "I am the Pict." This view of man and history is like Gunn's view of myth, expressed by Grant thus: "Time and space are its plastics which shape and dissolve in essential meanings...." /p.87/19

Man is identified here, as in Young Art and Old Hector and The Green Isle of the Great Deep, with the heroic Gaelic figures of Finn and Cuchulainn. But the Gaelic legend that provides the solution for life, as the salmon and nuts legend provided it for The Green Isle of the Great Deep, is that of the Silver Bough. A king gives up his wife and children in order to possess the Silver Bough. After a year, he longs again for his family so he searches for them and the stranger who took them in exchange for the Bough. The king, transported to the palace of Mananan who was the disguised stranger, is reunited with his family and the gods also allow him to keep the Bough. The Silver Bough is identified as the passport to the land of the gods, or, to use the metaphor of the last





examined work, the lost chart to the paradise of primordial goodness. It actually becomes the panacea which redeems Martin, who is the poisoned man, the archetypal figure with which we have become familiar in Gunn. Grant recognizes in Martin a figure of death; he sees Martin's mind as a dead jungle--contorted branches, hanging creepers, all dead--"It was the end of mind, like an end of the world."/p. 105/<sup>20</sup> Unlike Ranald or Basil, he has gone beyond mere destructive intellect into nothingness. As Grant says, he is not suffering from materialism, but from the void that is the end of materialism. He becomes quite literally the archetype, the original model, of the negation at which the whole civilization could arrive. We never see Ranald or Basil developing into the poisoned man, but in the case of Martin we see him destroyed by himself and others till he becomes the living personification of an "annihilating insult to the basis of living,"/p. 34/<sup>21</sup> of a basic lack of care. This lack of care, this profound disillusion in the capacity of human beings, was engendered, as Martin tells Grant, by the memory of the flaying of a woman by the Japanese soldiers, the subsequent hunt of them, and their destruction through the total focussing of Martin's psychic power. The destruction of exterior forces eventually becomes internalized, and so it is with Martin. In Grant's comment on him, there are close verbal and conceptual parallels to the passage quoted at the beginning of this thesis chapter from Atom of



Delight which was written eight years later:

It was as if he had been taken to that vast inland country where all conscious analysis ceases and the mad impulses are themselves seen at work, where passion is no longer passion but pure violence in action, where violence in action feeds on violence, feeds and grows even more gargantuanly, until nothing ultimately is left to be destroyed but the destroyer himself; and then in a final upsurge the destroyer turns on himself and achieves his last obliterating triumph in a frenzy of self-destruction. /pp. 253-254/22

During his discussion with Martin in the wheelhouse, Grant speaks of the moral significance of mythology, in particular, of British mythology. Its significance lies in its vivifying effect, in its heroic ideal of dauntless courage, stamina, and tragedy. Martin is saved or reborn only when he accepts the solution of the legend of the Silver Bough, the reunion of the family and continued possession of the Silver Bough.

Though Andy is killed and the pot is not refound, there is a profound acceptance at the end of the book that, to put it tritely, all has ended for the best. Martin, who had said that mankind had taken the wrong turning, accepts his own dictum that it is "stupid, literally bloody stupid"/p. 170/23 to continue on the wrong track, and turns to a rejuvenating mythic pattern of life. How does one reconcile this successful outcome of the quest and the ability of the poisoned man to step aside and be saved from himself with the contemporaneous pessimism of The Shadow and The Lost Chart? It may be possibly attributable to the mental flux of the author



during this period.

The last of the postwar novels which we shall examine is The Well at the World's End [1951]. This work, generally optimistic in tone, contains many of the mythic elements which we have seen in the novels since Morning Tide. It becomes a resolution of life; containing, as it does, the mythic totality of life as conceived by Gunn.

Consider the basic pattern of the book. It is the quest, the design we have seen in Highland River, The Green Isle of the Great Deep, The Shadow, Lost Chart and The Silver Bough. The search for the well at the world's end is the equivalent of the hazel pool of Art and Hector in The Green Isle of the Great Deep, in which the living source of wisdom lies hidden under a rocky shelf. It is also analogous to Kenn's quest in Highland River, the search for the moment of delight, for its essence, a search which appears to work in a backwards direction in the case of Peter, from death and madness to death and life, to eventual harmony and salvation born of new-found wisdom, if one can speak of salvation, whilst excluding any extra-human concepts of God or an after-life. The real well starts Peter off on a quest for the metaphysical well, a journey which necessitates crossing the boundary into a super-human world, from which there may be no return. The first question which confronts Peter is whether there is any of the well left anywhere in the poisoned world; if there is, how





does one approach it without being drowned in its angry overflow of water? Peter, feeling that man has forgotten not only the manner of approach, but also the existence of the well, sets off to bring back its magic water to the goddess of the sea, Fand. His manner of approach becomes more successful, until, before his expected second contact with the wild man, he knows instinctively how to approach the last source of wisdom, the last contact with one beyond the boundary. The first habitation he comes across after leaving Fand is Phemie's croft, which he knows to be the "half-way house between being on the earth and under it." /p. 42/24 From this point on, the story is at times in this world, and at times over the boundary of another world in which is the well. From time to time, Peter assesses the quest; for example, he says after leaving Phemie:

Odd thing that his journey so far should have been an affair, not of crystal wells or immortal shores, but of near death and madness and old age, with superstition and drunkenness ahead. Perhaps he had begun at the wrong end and was travelling widdershins? /p. 57/25

Just before climbing the west slope of Loch a'Cheo, he reiterates this last statement:

Once again the notion came to him that perhaps he had been travelling backwards. The first ravine so nearly the ravine--of death. The wild man on the tossing bridge --half-way between life and death. The old woman--still in life but only just. The mountains of superstition, where man was lusty. Jock's false well, with its crystal glimmer of the immortal spirit, its garden in Spain. Cocklebuster in his prime, with sin in the Garden of Eden, and a married woman in the



hotel. Then Peggy--say, twenty-one. Love--or, at least so far, love in a mist. If this went on, he might very easily, by the time he got back to Fand, if back to her he ever did get, be a child in arms at the beginning of the world. /p.199/26

In fact, this is exactly the situation at the end of the book, when Peter, fortified by sheep's milk taken from her like a child at its mother's breast, crawls like a child back to Fand, who, like the other women of the book, is the personification of some facet of the Savage Goddess, the eternal mother-lover. Analogous to this return to the eternal earth-mother is Kenn's journey towards the mountain, the rock in the desert place in Highland River.

Lying in the wild man's cave, Peter questions his journey and sees his search as a series of moments when life had acquired further dimensions, of tranced moments, "the fleeting gleam from some realm of rare delight." /p.279/27 It is in pursuit of these gleams that the reader has followed the novelist since the early works. At the end of the book, Peter has found the way, though not the end.<sup>28</sup> Gunn, through Peter, appears to accept the limitation of not reaching the goal. Unlike Kenn and Young Art and Old Hector, Peter does not finally reach the well, though he has had glimpses of it in the circle of his Odyssean journey:

No one could see the end of the way, but of the way itself, in insight, in understanding, there could be no doubt. For man could experience that, and know its relief, and know its strange extended gladness.



That was the beginning .... If the lure of transcendence, of timeless or immortal implication, came around, pay no great attention, but move from one step to the next, and look at this face and stay with that ... and let what would happen in the place where happenings and boundaries were. /p.294/29

Here is the maximum limited optimism which is possible to Gunn in the postwar world.

Associated with the quest pattern in the earlier books, we have seen the figures of the hunter and the earth-mother goddess. These, too, are included in the work with particular emphasis on the woman in her various facets as the Savage Goddess. Gunn displays an obvious knowledge of Graves' book, The White Goddess, particularly in his portrait of Mrs Douglas, who becomes the goddess in her fight with her husband above the loch.<sup>30</sup> Douglas and his friends represent man, the hunter, as does Cocklebuster, who is in thrall to the Goddess. The other facet of man which was developed as early as Morning Tide, that of the heroic Viking, is also included here in the figures of Malcolm, Angus, and Willie.

Other elements occur which we have met before. There is the feeling of many years and people at one's back with special reference to the Picts. In the postwar world, men feel cut off from this source of strength and knowledge. For this alienation, Gunn finds an objective correlative in the figure of Alick, who, though not a poisoned man utterly cut off, does stand between the two worlds. As Peter says:





/Peter/ had the intuition that somewhere in his story Alick would go through the boundary. This was at once utterly astonishing and exciting and yet in the same moment explained the division in the man, the impersonal friendliness and the final scepticism, the near warmth of the boiling pot and the far arid moor where the roots of belief wilt or wither. A Highland product he was, like the smuggled whisky; as modern as a Paris studio, as old as a peat. My God, here was the modern spirit's dichotomy in a choice setting.  
/p. 139/31

Obviously man cannot live in a poisoned world and remain unaffected by it--the best that can be achieved is the balance found in Alick. Only once in this optimistic book does Gunn sketch for us the surrounding world; and note how his description of it echoes the mythic fallen world he has created in previous books:

What a face-about from the hills and the glens and the swift feet chasing the stars into the morning--to the prison cell and the slow analysis and death in the underground corridor. Patriarchal man was at long last getting his cerebral machine into top gear. Having slain the Savage Goddess and gone peddling in fig leaves for a longish time, he was now on the rampage with an enthusiasm so grey that gods withered in its passage and the poor old sheep were blown into what was no longer eternity. And he thought it not only wonderful but also good for the sheep.  
Marvellous fellow, this new kind of grey totalitarian super goat. /p. 229/32

We have seen in The Green Isle of the Great Deep, the blend of Celtic and Christian myth that also occurs in this book. And the use of the double figure which we saw in The Shadow is present more clearly in the identification of Peter with the wild man, the latter actually undergoing death, whereas





Peter narrowly avoids it. Not only is the double figure carried on from The Shadow, but so also is the use of Greek mythology. Of course, the concept of the Savage Goddess lends itself to exploration in a Greek milieu, so that there are frequent references to the Maenads and to the plays of Euripides in the novel. Moly, the magic plant held by Odysseus to afford protection against Circe, is echoed in Mothan, which restores one's toradh or virtue, and which Peter uses on his odyssey to fend off the witchery of the goat.<sup>33</sup>

It is interesting to note that in the earlier novel, The Shadow, Gunn will not accept Greek myth as an ordering pattern for experience; yet in this novel, he not only uses it but also accepts it. The hero, Peter, is well acquainted with classical learning and Mrs Douglas, who represents the Goddess in her maturity, is a figure who, like Peter, is sympathetically portrayed. It appears as if Gunn is able to see the value of the foreign myth. No longer is it too intellectualized to serve as a redeeming force. In this novel, which we have already noted as embracing many elements of Gunn's mythic vision expressed in earlier works, he seems to be incorporating Celtic and Greek myth into a meaningful totality. His vision is whole because it has come to terms with the forces in modern life which had been represented for Gunn by Greek myth.

It is apparent from this cursory examination of The Well at the World's End, that it contains within it many of the



mythic elements which Gunn has used over the previous two decades, and is an amalgam or index of his consciousness. Thus this book is a fitting place to end our investigation of Gunn's use of myth and history, as it develops over the most prolific period of Gunn's literary production.



CHAPTER V  
CONCLUSION: EVALUATION  
OF GUNN'S MYTHIC--HISTORIC TECHNIQUE

Having followed Gunn through a representative collection of his novels from the first works written during the inter-war years to those of the postwar era, we must now attempt to evaluate Gunn's use of myth and history, of the folk-tradition, as a patterning device for life and for the novel, and as a mainspring of character and action. The problems, which we must at least recognize in this final survey, include those of his position in Scottish literature, of his conscious utilization of myth, of the applicability of a particular myth to a universal audience, and of the success of Gunn's efforts to order experience.

Where does Gunn stand in the Scottish tradition of literature? We have seen, in the introductory chapter, the view of the moulding power on man of history and mythology which was held by novelists like Scott and Stevenson, and like many of the novelists contemporaneous and antecedent to him, Gunn has, as we have seen, a profound sense of history and mythology, and especially of the shaping power of these elements on the human soul. Yet Gunn is an innovator in the tradition





by virtue of his extensive use of the above elements as controlling factors on the novel structure, for instance, in Highland River and The Silver Bough, and as influencing factors on the entire movement or cycle of life, presented across the span of thirty years in the novels.

Regarding Gunn's conscious use of myth, we can see from the many allusions to Freud /in particular to Totem and Taboo/ and also to Jung and to Graves, that it is obvious Gunn is fully aware of the ramifications of using myth. Though he is using it deliberately for artistic purposes, this does not invalidate the use, for the reader does not feel that the patterning is artificial, nor that it is forced on the material by the novelist.

Gunn's mind appears to fall naturally into the mythic-historic pattern on which he draws, so that the mode does not appear as a highly artifical attempt of the sophisticate to return to the primitive, or the supposedly vital. Taking into consideration Gunn's theory of the effect of environment, society, society's history and spiritual outlook on man--a theory we have already seen expressed by Stevenson--we should not be surprised to find that he fits into the Celtic-Biblical cosmos as into a second skin, for that environment is native to him.

We have spoken of the mythic-historic patterning that Gunn uses. The two elements of myth and history are interwoven and are considered by Gunn to interact. The interaction



begins with the Celtic past /historical/ being blended into a mythical past which becomes generalized into a paradisaal state. Celtic culture today, as portrayed by Gunn, is characterized by survivals of Celtic mythology; yet non-Celtic mythic elements have intruded, symbolizing the impact of the outside world, represented by war, atrocities, science and psychology. Gunn interprets the present state with a myth of his own devising, that is, a myth of the poisoned civilization and poisoned man, of the quest for the moment of delight. In the juxtaposition and conflict of all these elements, historical and mythological, we have the final statement or resolution presented by Gunn. We can see this interaction of history and myth in such a novel as The Silver Bough. The Celtic mythic past is represented by the cairn, while the builders of the cairn, shadowy unknown figures, represent the paradisaal mythical past. Contemporary Celtic culture and its mythology are found in the society of Clachar, in particular, and also in the family of Anna, her mother and Sheena, with their legend of the Silver Bough. As we have seen in the last chapter, Anna and Sheena are connected not only to the cairn and its builders, but also to Martin, who symbolizes the impact of modern civilization on the closed society. Modern history and Gunn's personal myth of poison are tied together in the figure of Martin. Out of the interaction of these elements, Gunn creates a solution to life, which



attempts to draw these elements into harmony.

The close connection between the Celtic milieu and Gunn's own myth can be seen very clearly in The Silver Bough, and obviously any pattern which Gunn creates from his own cultural and physical background will be viable for himself and for others from the same milieu. But what is important is whether that pattern has any application beyond this small circle of readers who have been raised in the particular environment. Is Gunn merely a competent or good regional novelist, or has he something to say to the world at large? From his movement away from the narrowly provincial view of life, that we see in Morning Tide, to a personal mythology of the poisoned civilization and poisoned man, universally applicable, that appears in the postwar novels, one must deduce that he is definitely attempting to speak to a wider audience than a provincial one. The cynical may say that the attempt is unsuccessful, and they may point to Gunn's relative obscurity and limited acceptance by the public both in his native land and abroad. Yet, concerning this rejection by his fellow Scots, we must observe that none of the figures of the Scots literary renaissance to which Gunn belongs have been recognized and accepted by their compatriots or contemporaries--indeed the prophet is of no honor in his own country. If he has failed to speak immediately to the world, the fault may not necessarily lie in the novelist, but rather in his public





or in the contemporary world situation. On this question, I may refer to some remarks by Philip Wheelwright, who emphasizes the need for myth in literature in general and in our consciousness, in order that we may regain insight and "human blessedness."<sup>1</sup> Because of the living-death state of our society, we must escape the "blind alley of empirical positivism"<sup>2</sup> by redefining our understanding of myth and our mythic consciousness, in order to expand love and the sense of "radical significance"<sup>3</sup>, which is the root of both religion and poetry.

Now Gunn attempts the task of redefinition by using Celtic mythology, and also by creating his own mythic scheme, which he believes to have universal application. We have seen the emphasis Gunn has placed on integration of the individual in a society or tradition. His poisoned men are all cut off from a community with a history; they may belong to a mob, but the essence of a mob is different in quality from that of a community. Wheelwright is also aware of the result of alienation and isolation of the individual from the community and its mythology:

Myth is the expression of a profound sense of togetherness--a togetherness not merely upon the plane of intellect, as is primarily the case among fellow-scientists, but a togetherness of feeling and of action and of wholeness of living.<sup>4</sup>

.....  
 ... when the consciousness of individuals separates itself too utterly from the sustaining warmth of the





common myth-consciousness, the dissociated consciousness becomes in time unoriented and sterile, fit for neither great poetry nor great wisdom nor great deeds.<sup>5</sup>

This myth, being an "expression of whole experiences that whole men have known and felt,"<sup>6</sup> is an essential and deliberately-used ingredient in great literature. If a poet lives in an age of vital myth, like Aeschylus or Dante, his work can be a magnificent expression of this vitality. Even if he lives, like Shakespeare and Virgil, in an age in which myth is beginning to decline as essential truth, the writer can use the myth coherently and meaningfully. He can be great. But if the artist is born

... in an age like our own, in the late afternoon of a culture, when the myths that once moved men to great deeds now survive as antiquarian curiosities: such a poet will feel himself to be living in a cultural wasteland, his materials will be fragmentary and unpromising, and while he may prove an ingenious renovator of ruined monuments or a resourceful practitioner of metajournalism, his contribution as a poet--the contribution of a whole man who speaks powerfully to whole men--will be small.<sup>7</sup>

.....  
The poet of today--and by that I mean the poetic impetus in all of us today--is profoundly inhibited by the dearth of shared consciousness of myth.<sup>8</sup>

If the acid test of time, the test of the approbation of cultivated readers over a variety of periods and cultural mileus, proves that Gunn's message fails in communicating itself meaningfully to the reader, that his method of ordering experience is not viable, or of use to his compeers, then the reason of his failure lies partly in his age. As a partial man



living in a sick society, there is no possibility of total communication to an audience which is itself sick. His age severely shakes Gunn's vision as we have seen in books like The Shadow, but it is too soon to judge whether his solution provided by the quest pattern as we find it in, say, Well at the World's End, is not the foretaste or the heralding of a rejuvenated mythic sense, which may be awakening in the world.

If one thinks of Highland River as the most perfect absorption of life and myth into a new meaningful coherent whole, then how does the rest of the Gunn canon measure up to this standard? Obviously, such a work as The Green Isle of the Great Deep is not so artistically tidy and coherent as its predecessor, because the novelist is attempting to use more than one mythic strand. Nevertheless, the end product is not a welter of confusion and contradiction. Rather the book is immeasurably enriched. The reverberations set up by the mythic elements create a complex tableau of sensations and responses from the reader. The complexity of life is best represented by a multiplicity of symbols, allusions and a diversity of mythic traditions. Even in The Shadow, where the overall pattern of life breaks down in a welter of incoherent experiences, the use of myth still is of interest. The introduction of Greek mythology, in particular the legend of Kronos, is quite effective in further explication of the alienation of man. Myth also serves efficaciously to



communicate integration of man in the postwar novels. For example, The Silver Bough is a work in which the philosophic message, that of the essential unity and identification of mankind, is perfectly bodied forth in a mythic-historic framework. Gunn's message throughout his career is well expressed in the mythic framework he chooses.

Although the final efficacy of Gunn's use of myth and history as ordering of experience is not definitely ascertainable yet, one may say that there is a basic validity in Gunn's use of myth, because there are analogies between the particular situation and the mythic metaphor used to express it in eternal or absolute terms. For example, the mythic confusion of The Shadow adequately expresses both the world and the personal chaos portrayed in the novel, and even the mixed concept of the Green Isle of the Great Deep-Eden-Heaven myth well fits an exploration of the nature of totalitarianism and the contemporary manifestation of the eternal problems of evil and free will.

As we have seen in the previous chapters, an analogy does exist between the contemporary state and the myth; consequently the novels, through the validity of the analogy and the universality of the myth or archetype, tend to set up significant reverberations, which ripple out in ever-increasing circles; we must conclude that Gunn's use of myth and history is valid. The temporary breakdown of his mythic





solution, which we have seen in the later novels is not entirely culpable. True, in a manner, he has failed as an artist, for the flux of experience has not been fully controlled, but has swept, like the angered waters of the well at the world's end, over his mind. But the breakdown and reconstruction is at least symptomatic of his intellectual and philosophical honesty, which gives a greater validity to his quest into chaos and to his answer to the flux, for he has seen and faced the worst.

Gunn is worthy of attention also, because he has attempted to grapple with the universal problems of the human condition. He has not been content to be merely a regional novelist, the most sensitive Highland writer of our day, or even the recorder of a period of history such as the immediate postwar era. Though his solution to the problems may be condemned by some as sheer atavism and indefensible primitivism, and though his method of presentation, mythic patterning, may be open to the criticism of being esoteric, his works are valuable, for they transcend the realms of mere trivia or entertainment.



## FOOTNOTES

### CHAPTER I

1. Kurt Wittig, The Scottish Tradition in Literature (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1958), p.337
2. Ivor Brown, Summer in Scotland (London: Collins, 1952)
3. Donald MacKenzie, Scottish Folklore and Folk Life (Glasgow: Blackie and Sons Ltd, 1935), pp.174-175
4. Wittig, p.159
5. Ibid., p.160
6. Ibid., p.254
7. Ibid., p.257
8. Robert Louis Stevenson, The Weir of Hermiston, p.199, found in the Complete Works of (London: Edinburgh Edition, 1895-8)
9. Ibid., pp.138-139
10. J.M.Reid, Scotland Past and Present (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p.165

### CHAPTER II

1. Neil M.Gunn, Morning Tide (London: Faber & Faber, 1931), pp.60-61
2. Ibid., p.81
3. Ibid., p.85
4. Ibid., p.85
5. Ibid., p.145
6. Ibid., p.68
7. Ibid., p.68



8. Ibid., p. 57
9. Ibid., p. 245
10. Ibid., p. 249
11. Ibid., p. 256
12. Ibid., p. 189
13. Ibid., p. 190
14. Ibid., p. 193
15. Ibid., p. 192
16. Ibid., p. 199
17. Neil M. Gunn, Highland River (London: Faber & Faber, 1937), p. 32
18. Ibid., p. 34
19. Ibid., p. 36
20. Ibid., p. 37
21. Ibid., p. 40
22. Ibid., p. 40
23. Ibid., p. 49
24. Ibid., pp. 61-62
25. Ibid., p. 62
26. Ibid., pp. 122-3
27. Ibid., p. 197
28. Ibid., p. 196
29. Ibid., p. 245
30. Ibid., p. 211
31. Ibid., p. 211
32. Ibid., p. 235



33. Ibid., p. 97
34. Ibid., p. 97
35. Ibid., p. 99
36. Ibid., p. 8
37. Ibid., p. 84

### CHAPTER III

1. Neil M. Gunn, Young Art and Old Hector (London: Faber & Faber, 1942), p. 89
2. Ibid., p. 88
3. Ibid., p. 58
4. Ibid., p. 59
5. Ibid., p. 102
6. Ibid., p. 21
7. Ibid., p. 74
8. Ibid., p. 87
9. Ibid., p. 250
10. Ibid., p. 250
11. Neil M. Gunn, The Green Isle of the Great Deep (London: Faber & Faber, 1944), p. 23
12. Ibid., p. 91
13. Ibid., pp. 201-202
14. Ibid., p. 114
15. Ibid., p. 138
16. Ibid., p. 154
17. Ibid., p. 155





18. Ibid., p.245
19. Ibid., p.51
20. Ibid., p.196
21. Ibid., p.130
22. Ibid., p 184

#### CHAPTER IV

1. Neil M.Gunn, Atom of Delight (London: Faber & Faber, 1956), pp.217-218
2. \_\_\_\_\_, The Shadow (London: Faber & Faber, 1948), p.7
3. Ibid., p.48
4. Ibid., p.9
5. Ibid., p.19
6. Ibid., p.19
7. Ibid., p.19
8. Ibid., p.19
9. Ibid., p.24
10. Ibid., p.35
11. Ibid., p.65
12. Ibid., p.157
13. \_\_\_\_\_, The Lost Chart (London: Faber & Faber, 1949), pp.306-307
14. Ibid., p.307
15. Ibid., p.121
16. Ibid., p.122
17. Ibid., p.334



18. Ibid., p. 349
19. \_\_\_\_\_, The Silver Bough (London: Faber & Faber, 1948), p. 87
20. Ibid., p. 105
21. Ibid., p. 34
22. Ibid., pp. 253-254
23. Ibid., p. 170
24. \_\_\_\_\_, The Well at the World's End (London: Faber & Faber, 1951), p. 42
25. Ibid., p. 57
26. Ibid., p. 199
27. Ibid., p. 279
28. Gunn compares this finding and following of the way to the Chinese philosophy of Tao, the Way, which aims at achieving solace in misfortune and communication with the gods. Paradoxically in Taoism, the Way becomes the end for Tao is conceived of as God by the founder of Taoism, Jang Ling. Thus Peter's quest has succeeded by virtue of the fact that he is on a quest--a way.
29. Neil M. Gunn, The Well at the World's End (London: Faber & Faber, 1951), p. 294
30. It is possible that Gunn had learned of the concept and nature of the Savage Goddess, of her relationship to poets, and that he knew of the Welsh tree alphabet from his own studies in Celtic mythology. However, Graves' book, published several years before The Well at the World's End, presents this information in such an easily accessible form that it seems likely Gunn knew the work. Though facets of the Great Goddess have been utilized before by Gunn, he has never named them specifically as the Savage Goddess. Thus, given the sequence of publication date, the presence in one book of both the goddess and the tree alphabet, and the obsessive interest in the problem of matriarchy and patriarchy in this novel, we can safely assume that Gunn knew Graves' work.



31. Neil M. Gunn, The Well at the World's End (London: Faber & Faber, 1951) p.139
32. Ibid., p.229
33. Mothan is not quite analogous to moly in that its leaves must be eaten not the root. It is not a deterrent to vice or evil as moly is in Milton's Comus, or in Homer's Odyssey. It restores virtue and it acts as an aphrodisiac, for the Savage Goddess is associated with love and fertility. Mothan also has Christian associations which moly does not. It is interesting that Odysseus uses moly against Circe, the Savage Goddess, the matriarchal figure, whereas Gunn uses mothan against the goat, symbolizing patriarchal religion and society.

#### CHAPTER V

1. Philip Wheelwright, "Poetry, Myth and Reality" in The Modern Critical Spectrum; editors: G. J. and N. M. Goldberg, (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1962), p.307. Wheelwright's essay first appeared in The Language of Poetry (1942)
2. Ibid., p.309
3. Ibid., p.309
4. Ibid., p.310
5. Ibid., p.311
6. Ibid., p.315
7. Ibid., p.315
8. Ibid., p.319





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APPENDIXTHE BROCH

For a definition of a broch we turn to Stewart Cruden's book, The Scottish Castle from which we have taken the following information:

A broch is (or was) a lofty circular tower of dry-built masonry, some 40 feet high. Its wall is immensely thick, as much as 20 feet at the base in some examples, and encloses a central courtyard space 30 to 40 feet in diameter. Save for a single low entrance, there are no external openings. The inside face of the wall is vertical but the outside presents a slow curved batter which thickens the wall at the bottom and gives the building its distinctive and graceful profile. The lower part of the wall is structurally solid, although beehive cells and a narrow gallery are not uncommonly within it, but above it is without exception of hollow-wall construction. The void between the inner and outer walls is spanned at regular vertical intervals of about five feet by galleries formed of single flagstones laid side by side across it. The floor of each gallery is thus the roof of that below. These galleries run round the entire circumference of the broch. Each is interrupted by a stair, also contained within the hollow of the wall, which begins usually above ground-floor level, and winds round about half of the circumference to the wall top. Within the courtyard space of the tower ... is found... a deep well. Two or three tiers of small openings look into the courtyard. Their purpose like that of the galleries is probably structural as they surmount the lintels of the ground-level doorways. It is not known whether or not the brochs were roofed, as none is complete to the wall-head. (p 1-2)

The broch had reached its fullest geographical expansion and was fully developed by the first century A.D. As



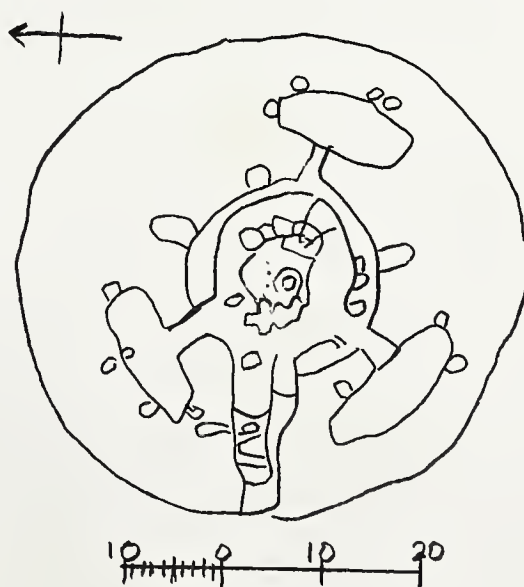
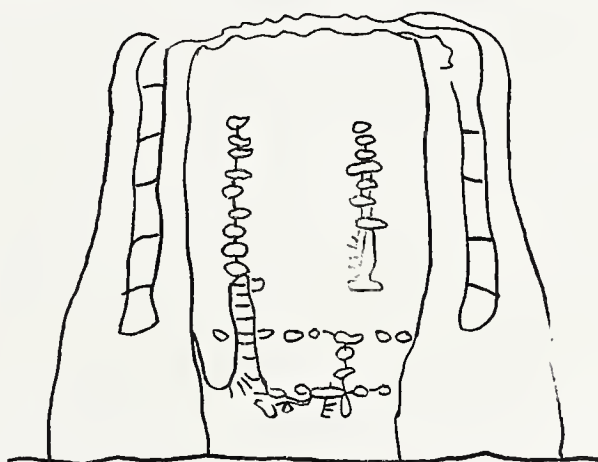


an example of fitness for purpose in military architecture,  
it has been seldom surpassed

They are always to be found near arable land, either still cultivated or plainly cultivated in the past. They are seldom far from the edge of the sea. They are strong towers capable of passive defence, but in no sense offensive structures. (p 4)

The mystery of their origin and of the people by whom they were made and occupied, and against whom they were intended, add greatly to the interest which they possess as early architectural works of outstanding merit. The origin of the style is wholly constructional, and the style so arresting as to imply a preconceived notion. It was an idea before it was a fact--the idea of a highly original mind. (pp 5-6)

It is the most remarkable ancient castle in Europe.  
(p 6)

















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